

The Inconvenience of Revolution: Zapatismo, Cynicism, Dignity and Memory

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Housing, land, employment, food, education, independence, democracy, liberty, justice, and peace, these were our banners during the dawn of 1994. These were our demands during that 500-year-long night. These are today our exigencies.

Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN)

1. Why do we need to be pardoned?

What are they going to pardon us for?

For not dying of hunger?

For not accepting our misery in silence?

For not accepting humbly the historic burden of disdain and abandonment?

For having risen up in arms after we found all other paths closed?

For being mainly indigenous?

For fighting for liberty, democracy, and justice?

For refusing to surrender?

For refusing to sell ourselves out?

Who should ask for pardon, and who can grant it?

Should we ask for pardon from those who deny us the right and capacity to govern ourselves?

From those who don't respect our customs or our culture and who ask us for identification papers and obedience to a law whose existence and moral basis we don't accept?

From those who oppress us, torture us, assassinate us, disappear us for the grave 'crime' of wanting a piece of land on which we can grow something to fill our stomachs?

Who should ask for pardon and who can grant it?

(Marcos, "Who Should Ask for Pardon and Who Can Grant It?").

2. "Cynicism ... was not a system of ideas in which we can identify well-delineated components or a hierarchical scheme of philosophical tenets. Far more than a theoretical stance vis-à-vis the world, Cynicism was a response, a reaction, to those conditions of human existence that the Cynics ... found unacceptable" (Luis Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope: The Man in the Tub*).

3. *Parrhêsia*: "speech act or discourse of injustice proclaimed by the weak against the powerful" that exposes "the truth of his injustice". It was also a call to change "one's style of life, one's relation to others, and one's relation to oneself" (Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhêsia*).

4. "The Zapatistas think that society, and the world, should be transformed from below. We think we also have to transform ourselves: in our personal relations, in culture, in art, in communication ... and create another kind of society, in such a way that power, or he who has power, comes to have a different relationship with society" (Subcomandante Marcos).

5. Old Antonio sat on a log and said nothing. After a while he spoke: "Do you see? Everything is calm and clear, it seems that nothing happens" ... Then he pointed to the tip of the nearest mountain. The gray clouds lay down at the top and lightning broke the diffuse blue of the hills. A true storm, but it looked far away and harmless. After a while, Old Antonio said: "When everything is calm down here, in the mountains there is a storm and the streams grow and start to come down the hills... In the rainy season, this river is fierce, a brown whip, [but] its power does not come from the rain that falls on its banks; it is

the streams that come down from the mountain that feed it. By destroying it, the river rebuilds the earth and its waters will be corn, beans and sugar on the tables of the jungle. Our struggle is just like that ... its strength is born in the mountains, but it is not seen until it reaches the bottom.” And, answering my question of whether he thinks it was time to start, he added: “It's time for the river to change color” (Subcomandante Marcos, “The Streams When They Come Down,” in *Relatos del Viejo Antonio*; my translation)

6. *Mētis*: “a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment.” *Mētis* “resists simplification into deductive principles which can successfully be transmitted through book learning, because the environments in which it is exercised are so complex and non-repeatable that formal procedures of rational decision making are impossible to apply” (James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*).

7. “The indigenous peoples that support our cause have decided to resist without surrendering, without accepting the alms with which the supreme government intends to buy them. And they have so decided because they have made theirs a word that cannot be understood with the mind, that cannot be studied or memorized. It is a word that can only be lived with the heart, a word that is felt in the chest ... This word is DIGNITY, the respect we own ourselves, the right to be better, the right to fight for what we believe, the right to live, and to die, according to our ideals. Dignity is not studied, it lives or it dies, it hurts in the chest and teaches to walk. Dignity is that international homeland that, many times, we forget” (Subcomandante Marcos, “Dignity cannot be studied, it lives or it dies”).

8. “It is not a question of imposing one dignity or of finding what ‘true dignity’ really means. It is a question rather of recognizing the validity of different forms of struggle and different opinions as to what the realization of dignity means” (John Holloway).

9. “So that pain that united us made us speak, and we recognized that in our words there was truth ... we knew that there is hope still in our breasts. We talked with ourselves, we looked inside ourselves and we looked at our history: we saw our great-grandparents suffer and fight, we saw our grandparents fight, we saw our parents with fury in their hands, yet we saw that not everything had been taken away from us, that we still had the most valuable thing, what made us live ... we saw, brothers, that we had DIGNITY ... we saw that DIGNITY was good for persons to be persons again, and dignity returned to dwell in our hearts, and we were new again, and the dead, our dead, saw that we were new again and they called us again: to dignity, to struggle” (Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee).

10. Dignity is that homeland without nationality, that rainbow that is also a bridge, that murmur of the heart regardless of the blood that lives in it, that rebellious irreverence that mocks borders, customs and wars (“First Declaration from La Realidad,” EZLN).

“A world in which many worlds fit”

A bibliography and list of references for this lecture can be found on the HUM 110 website