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Atop the Watchtower

A Long Look at Yesterday

Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional

December 28, 2024

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This is a presentation over what the *compañeros* and *compañeras*, *jefas* and *jefes* will talk about how the idea of the Commons was born. So this is *Atop the Watchtower: A Long Look at Yesterday*. It is more or less a small short history of how everything began.

Some of these words were conceived over a year ago. Foreseeing that with the coming of the thirty year anniversary of the uprising, nonsense would be said about Zapatismo. And in effect, that was so, and they have continued on doing so all of this year: interviews of deserters with pending criminal cases, books full of the same communal spaces from thirty years ago, analysis, commentaries, declarations, stolen valor. They have and have had ignorance, pedantry, frivolousness in common, and act as if we have died already. As if we're incapable of telling our own story. As if we exist no longer. And given that we were no longer famous, these people could then present themselves as the *connoisseurs* they used to be and as capable of explaining what they never once understood nor will ever understand. What's more pathetic is that these people keep living in what they did or lived thirty years ago. It must be

sad that thirty years later they have nothing else worth mentioning about themselves. In short, all the trash that tends to gather around whatever date —Children’s Day, Mother’s Day, Woman’s Day, Day of the Dead, the Christmas season, New Years— has not changed at all.

A year ago the EZLN *jefas* and *jefes* decided to not make these words public and wait until the gossipmongers fell into their own trap, that of trying to usurp the word and the history. So then, allow me to tell you a rightful and true story.

This day of 28 December, but thirty one years ago, my original idea, that’s to say, the idea of Subcommandante Marcos —may God keep him in His holy glory and the Holy Virgin shower him with blessings— was to launch the uprising on that 28 December in 1993. He reckoned that the enemy forces first reports would be taken as an Innocent’s Day practical joke, and it would slow down the foreseeable reaction, allowing time for the retreat into the mountains after a strike that would take seven municipal centers surrounding the Southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas. Unsurprisingly, we weren’t ready on the day, and time was running out because the orders were to launch the uprising in 1993 and there were only three days left until the deadline ran out. But on this day, thirty one years ago, Zapatista soldiers began to concentrate in their respective meeting and deployment spots. The militia gave its farewells to their families and friends; we, the insurgent troops, did not say goodbye to anyone because it was with our new family, the indigenous communities, with whom we descended down the mountain with. We lied to ourselves thinking about what would be —what would be done— the day after, because we knew there was no “day after.” And nevertheless, in the towns, we would say, “We’re off, *compas*, we won’t be long, we’ll be back later.” However, those who left for war and those who stayed behind were ready. We were trained not to die. Although we knew that some Indians of Maya descent —tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands— prepared in silence and lined up in the morning, we were alone. Everything

else anyone else says and said is a lie. Success has many different fathers but only one womb to birth it, the mountain's womb.

The electoral left was morally defeated, it was off in a corner licking the wounds that *Salenismo* had given it in the past five years. The Powerful of the day, Carlos Salinas de Gortari,¹ boasted of his popularity, he was famous; with a high approval rate he controlled the ruling party and not just a few of those of the opposition, he had a candidate and a project for the next thirty years. Not to mention that the media lined up for him. One part of the progressive Church had done everything to expel the "red bandanna hit men," —that's what those who today call themselves "co-conspirators" used to call us— and having failed, didn't expect anything to happen, said that everything was "child's play." The Revolutionary Vanguard placed its bets on nothing would happening, said that it was all a bluff, that those "illiterate Indians" were incapable of doing anything without the leadership of the proletariat-turned-party. The progressive intelligentsia had not recovered from the End of History's blow.

There were no special analysts, nor café anthropologists, nor media, nor interviews, nor support, nor critics, nor photographers, nor journalistic scoops, nor special envoys. Nor organic intellectuals, nor delegates to other countries, nor people in solidarity, nor sympathy. Nor hope, nor anything.

Night, death, oblivion, doom reigned.

Poorly armed, poorly fed, ill-equipped, not gifted —mostly— but with a mix of rage and desperation, we set out to tear a bit of light from the night, something —even if scant— with which to light up the night we lived in. Don't be harsh to those who turned us away, you yourselves would've thought that goal was crazy. What's more, any half-intelligent person would've warned us that it was a mistake that would cost us thousands of lives. They would've given us many reasons: "What about the objective and subjective con-

¹ The 60th Mexican president (1988-1994) at the time.

ditions? What about balance of forces? What about the military's power? What about the *gringos*? What about NATO? What about the Warsaw Pact? What about the geopolitics?" If you wish to, do a bit of research to see what was happening in our country and the world back then, now imagine that a person of low standing, dark skin, strange clothes, unintelligible tongue, approaches you and whispers into your ear, "Tomorrow, when the morning star rises, we will turn the world on its head."

Wouldn't you been scandalized? Wouldn't you have distanced yourself from such person, thinking they were drunk or crazy, or both?

Wouldn't you have denounced him? Saying that he was between madness and incitement?

Indeed, before all of those arguments and reasons, I can only tell you that Desperation has reasons Reason knows not.

And yes, Desperation lead us to do what we did, but it was an *organized* desperation, that's the key difference.

And what happened happened. Morning was born in the Southeast Mexican mountains. A look in the streets of one of defeated cities —the most racist of them all—, this one in which we are in here today, prayed, "We, the ever dead, are here dying again, but now so that we may live." Over on this side, a *mestizo* was taking a decision that would end up costing him his life: Insurgent Subcomandante Pedro —Sub Pedro. His blood cast down the sentence from the pulpit used then to enact. "They'll leave" they said, "They'll leave them alone," they warned. And together with them, on the front lines, Sub Pedro went out to remind History where the Morning was born.

Months later, the Powerful was no longer popular, had neither fame nor party, nor candidate. The Revolutionary Vanguard found out what was happening through the media; the electoral left cheered up and in cliques and cafés bragged, "Have you seen what we did in Chiapas?" The progressive Church, and the Catholic Church in general, had a prominence it had never dreamed of.

in mind our strength and abilities, the 7th Calvary isn't coming to help us because the 7th Calvary does not exist. Distrust He Who is Powerful, He will never abandon the belief in destroying us. Distrust those who only approach when all is going well, they've only come to loot the cause and turn it into a commodity. Honor those who lend their hand and heart when we are on our own. Be far-sighted, look beyond borders, race, language, culture, and modes; there are others like us —different, yes— but with the same yearning, the same commitment, and the same isolation. Always look within and touch our people's heart, that heart will tell you where to go, when to stop, and when to reprise the path. You'll see scorn, betrayal, lies, slander, death, destruction, but don't lose sight of the destination and above all don not waver from the path." With respect to Old Antonio, I want to clarify that that "We" now includes many more from many places and times, from many corners, many modes, languages, colors, races, and genders. It is these people whom we have the honor of calling comrades. Let us say also "many minorities" when we say "We."

And well, here we are, in a small corner of a secluded place, but with family everywhere in the world, of all colors, of all languages, of all races, of all sizes, of all genders, and of all modes. "We, the Zapatista peoples, We the smallest." We have a history, culture, language and light of our own. We are clear for whom our ears are for, and for whom our words are for; for whom our heart's for, and to whom the Morning belongs. We have a cause which is Life, and we have a name: We are the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

And terrible and marvelous things will shine under that name. Alright, cheers, and listen. Thank you.

Journalists from all over the world came to *look*, not to see, to *hear*, not to listen. In those days, a whole generation of young reporters arrived. Here they gained experience, prestige and, true, not few tricks. They were received and attended to regardless whether they were from big, medium, or small outlets. They did their work honestly and if they were published or not, well that was their bosses' call, not their own. They peeked into reality and maybe one was touched. Others thought that it was enough to don a ski mask to be a Zapatista. Perhaps some uncovered the power of communicating what is seen and decided on following that path. Others perhaps discovered that silence and a blind eye are also commodities and can be sold for a high price if those in power pay.

They all left. Some earlier, some later. Each with their own alibi. Some returned with the willingness to peer into the terrifying and marvelousness they managed to perceived. We are thankful *to all* for the glance and ear lent then, but we had to go on. To think beyond the circumstances, fleeting fame, frivolous trends, the now, the exclusive interview. We don't expect you to understand, but the world we fight for is also for you.

The rest of them? Well, they arrived, took what they could, and built an idea of themselves with that capital and distanced themselves. Well, so they think. What happened and is happening is that our vessel set sail. They stay in the same port of thirty one years ago believing they knew and believing they live. The so-called "specialists" presented a thousand and one explanations on what was happening; they abounded and redounded analysis with the most incredible of hypothesis, "Was it the poverty? Was it liberation theology? Was it the indigenous population? Was it the anti-State organizations? Was it the Revolutionary Vanguard? Was it the guerilla?"

But there was worse poverty in other states, other diocese were more radical —Lona in Oaxaca, Méndez Arceo in Morelos—. There were guerrillas in other parts, there were more Indians in other

zones, NGOs were wherever. And, well, a surplus of Revolutionary Vanguards were everywhere. Other analysts said and say that we were lucky. Lucky? If we were lucky it wouldn't have been necessary to do what did and do. "So," you may ask yourselves, "what was unique and decisive for that Morning?" And I answer, "A generation of indigenous young men and women of Maya roots," who were young then and now, with many calendars on their backs, we call them The Generation of '94. Many men and women from that generation, which rose up in arms thirty one years ago, is present here today and is the same that, through resistance and rebellion, laid the basis for autonomy. That which suffered the treason of the military invasion of '95, who took control of Mexico City in 1997, who resisted the military and police offensives of 1998, which visited many states of the republic in 1999, who realized Earthen Colored March in 2001, who decided on the application without permission of Zapatista autonomy, who warned in 2004 what was proven right in the period of 2018-2024, who in June of 2005 convened the Sixth Lacandona Jungle Declaration, who has since then been attacked and slandered by the progressive movement, who has organized meetings, festivals, talks of women in struggle —of artists, of thinkers—, who announced in 2020 their intent to invade Europe, who in 2021 convened parts of a whole in A Declaration For Life, who went against the current and flew to Europe, who renamed *lumlil cacencóp*² for what it is —unceded land—, who in 2023 set about a new challenge —the Commons—; who is today before you, at your side, and behind you. I suggest that you listen to them, to have the smallest amount of decency and humility, to come down from the clouds and try to understand and thus learn from those women and men. Some of those men and women are here for these days and they've come to give talks. These are my *compañeras* —the Zapatista communities— and my *compañeros*, the

² Note: I do not know what this specifically refers to, may be an incorrect transliteration.

Zapatista peoples; they have been my leaders for over ten years now, when one among them took EZLN supreme command, collectivized the Zapatista leadership, and have since then been who leads us.

With this brief history, would you really think that the Zapatista communities would let themselves be intimidated by the silence, the slander, social media, disorganized crime, the national guard, the State military, the Marines, the paramilitaries, the criminals, the pandemics, natural disasters, Trump, Putin, the 4T,³ obscurity, contempt, lies? Do you really believe that you are abandoning us? That in the solitude you condemn us to we became lost? You know how many times we've been declared dead, defeated, vanished, failures. Because good people also woke up: groups, collectives, movements, organizations. No, they didn't wake up, they were *already* awake, they just found us and thus found themselves. They realized they weren't alone, not just in the pain and rage, but also and most of all, in ceaseless struggle that seems easy and even appears as a protest slogan, but which in truth transforms into a thousand and one obstacles, tasteless problems, defeats, betrayals, descending more than rising, —falls. Nevertheless, they raise themselves up and the moment after the fall they are already taking another step. They've since accompanied us no matter the distance or date, and they support us and see us and try to understand us, —to understand themselves.

When, over ten years ago now, in 2013, the late Sub Marcos handed the charge to Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés, he simply told him, "It's your turn." Old Antonio reached over and added a piece of advice, "We only have each other; we were, we are, and we will be alone. Always remember —not the 1st of January of 94— but the eve; everything you think and plan to do, do so keeping

³ 4T, *Cuarta Transformacion*, "Fourth Transformation." The social and political program of the ruling MORENA party in Mexico that has encroached on Zapatista territory.