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October 11, 2017

Originally written for a Mexican History class.

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The Neo-Zapatistas brought in the New Year of 1994 with an insurrectionary spirit that the Mexican government was all too certain had been stamped out years before. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional was supposed to be the fulfillment of all revolutionary energy left over from the struggles of the 1910s. Yet while the PRI's politicians spectacularly rang in the New Year, an army of mostly Mayan campesinos was storming San Cristobal de Las Casas and other cities in Southern Mexico with arms in hand. Shocked news media rushed to cover the story, acting as if the Zapatistas were something new instead of part of a long tradition of indigenous, anti-capitalist rebels drawing inspiration from their traditional culture and historical figures like Emiliano Zapata and the anarchist Flores Magón brothers. In the years since the Neo-Zapatista rebellion in 1994, autonomous communities in Chiapas, Mexico have built a society that marks the realization of many of the dreams Ricardo Flores Magón envisioned in 1911. They have rejected electoralism and the state as a vehicle for revolutionary practice, expropriated private property for communal benefit, and

built self-governing communities where the ultimate authority lies with the people themselves.

As a small band of guerillas from Mexico City holed up in the mountains, their vanguardist views of social revolution were transformed by their close interactions with Mayan communal custom. They were forced to develop a critique of state power previously voiced by anarchists like Ricardo Flores Magón. The founding cadre of what would become the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) arrived to the Lacandon Jungle in 1982. Their politics were deeply rooted in the Marxist-Leninist tradition and as a guerilla movement, they had as their central aim the "overthrowing [of the] regime and the taking of power by the people".[1] Subcomandante Marcos, the famous spokesperson for the EZLN, herein referred to as the Zapatistas, refers to their initial proposal as "completely undemocratic and authoritarian".[2] This position clashed with the indigenous tradition of collective defense, collective living, and collective governance in the area, until many community members joined the EZLN and the indigenous forms of decision-making won out.[3] Although the Zapatistas quickly shed the idea of themselves being the vanguard of the revolution, they carried their longings for state power with them into the early days of their armed uprising.[4] As the drive to Mexico City became militarily unfeasible, the Zapatistas once again had to respond to practical necessity. This temporary delay in their plans seemingly morphed into an ideological distrust of the state. Marcos reflected this self-critical shift in the Zapatista position at a public event in August 1994, announcing their principle of "proposing, not imposing" and clarifying that "we neither want, nor are we able,

[1] Subcomandante Marcos, "*Interview with Subcomandante Marcos.*" Schools for Chiapas, May 11, 1994.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Lynd, Grubačić, *Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History* (Oakland: PM Press, 2008), 7–8.

barely compensated indigenous hands, could not be controlled by the PRI or any other party and once Zapatista territory had been carved out, thousands of people residing there refused to have any contact with the government. Though they were not able to abolish the state as Magón would have hoped, the Zapatistas created a dual power to the state that effectively made the state unnecessary. By working collectively and building cooperative stores, farms, and means of transport, they built on indigenous communal traditions but expanded closer towards the anarchist dream of a stateless and classless society. While Flores Magón never fully laid out a plan of what mass decision-making free from authority would look like, the Zapatistas captured the essence of an anti-authoritarian governance by implementing a system of bottom-up power with instructed and rotating delegates capable of coordinating resources over vast swaths of mountainous terrain. The experiment of the Zapatistas to build "a world where many worlds fit" is an ongoing process, but in a few short decades they have already realized many of the libertarian dreams of Ricardo Flores Magón.

to occupy the place that some hope we will occupy".[5] Marcos' statement signaled an acceptance that a Zapatista government in Mexico City was neither feasible nor desirable, a view solidified 16 months later in *The Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle*, when the Zapatistas announced themselves as a "political force which struggles against the State-Party system…which does not struggle to take political power.".[6] A rejection of seizing state power represented a significant shift from the Marxist-Leninist dogma that Marcos and his comrades carried with them into the jungle.

Nearly a century before the Zapatistas revolted in Chiapas, Ricardo Flores Magón declared himself an anarchist, an enemy to all hierarchical power relationships. The Zapatistas reject all of the traditional labels of ideology: marxist, anarchist, communist alike.[7] In many ways they have synthesized elements of many ideologies on the left with traditionally-held Mayan beliefs. Their preference for decentralized and horizontal relations between people places them firmly in Magón and the Mexican Liberal Party's legacy. Magón and the anarchists made it clear in their paper, *Regeneración*, as well as in their 1911 manifesto, that power corrupts all who take it, no matter how "well-intentioned [they] may be" and that placing someone in power was a wasted effort.[8] In this spirit, the Neo-Zapatistas hoped to build a Mexico "of those who don't build ladders to climb above others, but who look beside them to find another and make him or her their compañero or compañera".[9] The anarchists in the Mexican Liberal Party, "convinced that political liberty does not benefit the poor but only the palace

[5] Ibid.

[6] EZLN, *Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (Chiapas: 1996)

[7] Subcomandante Marcos, "*Interview with Subcomandante Marcos,*" May 11, 1994.

[8] Ricardo Flores Magón, *Manifesto of the Mexican Liberal Party*, 1911.

[9] Lynd, Grubačić, *Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History* (Oakland: PM Press, 2008), 10.

hunters", lashed out at all who sought to get elected.[10] Magón had a penchant for direct action, evidenced often through military raids on border towns and expropriations during strikes, and it is likely that he would have seen the Zapatistas who smashed polling stations during the "sham" 1997 Congressional elections as a favorable development.[11] He grew to despise anyone who sought to govern, whether they proclaimed themselves revolutionary or not. The Liberal Party had shifted from a reformist party to a revolutionary organization towards the end of the reign of Porfirio Díaz, and Magón became dismayed by Francisco Madero's retaining of all the mechanisms of the Porfirian state.[12] Most scandalously, the Mexican military, with Madero at the head, crushed the anarchist rebellion of Baja California in 1911.[13] Magón declared war on all future governors. To him, there were two choices: "a new yoke" or "life-redeeming expropriation" of all who sought rulership.[14] The Zapatistas, like Flores Magón, knew that freedom was not the ability to "change masters every six years", but the "extension of [participation] to all areas of life", in other words, total autonomy.[15] Both the Mexican Liberal Party and the EZLN became disillusioned with state power through experience and self-criticism, and once they did, sought new forms of organization that empowered all those affected by decisions to be the ones making them.

[10] Claudio Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 276; Ricardo Flores Magón, *Manifesto of the Mexican Liberal Party*, 1911.

[11] Claudio Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 286; Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 234.

[12] Claudio Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 286.

[13] Ibid, 289.

[14] Ricardo Flores Magón, *Manifesto of the Mexican Liberal Party*, 1911.

[15] EZLN, *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (Chiapas: 2005); Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 238.

well-equipped enemy than Ricardo could have ever imagined.[61] Still, it is doubtful that Flores Magón could have come up with a more anti-authoritarian way of making decisions over such a large territory. The Zapatistas, through years of trial and error came up with a form of decision-making that allows each person living in their autonomous zone a meaningful say in the decisions that affect their life. The positions of influence in Zapatista communities are not so much authorities as they are expressions of the demands of the people. There is no doubt that practice is in line with the anarchist sensibilities of Ricardo Flores Magón and the Mexican Liberal Party.

The Zapatistas seized a moment in history that Ricardo Flores Magón never could. Facing the longest lasting one-party dictatorship in the world and a capitalist system so much more entrenched than in Magón's day, the EZLN could not implement Magón's vision of a great overnight revolution. As they walked forward in rebellion, they kept their ears firmly on the people in their communities, listening for cues on what to do next. Clearly, the old blueprints for revolution were out-of-date; the indigenous people suffering under the crushing weight of capitalism with its daily indignities could not wait for the glorious Millenarian upheaval. Their clandestine waiting bought them time that the Mexican Liberal Party never had and once they began; they had to figure out the theoretical paths envisioned by Ricardo Flores Magón as they went. The EZLN avoided the pitfalls of so many mass social movements by refusing to get sucked into party politics, carrying forward Magón's distrust of politicians and rejecting the state as a vehicle of power that could bring liberatory results. Though this rejection of state power had to come as part of an evolving process, it left the Zapatistas in a position that was hard to co-opt. The massive expropriations of private farms, previously worked by many

[61] Subcomandante Marcos, *Our Word is Our Weapon* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), 90.

poused nearly 100 years before. In actuality, anarchists have not been so much opposed to leadership as they have rulership and domination. Magón would have likely found a lot to admire in the Zapatistas' system; the delegates do not actually have much power over their communities, but instead are mouthpieces of their community's collective will. Unlike the politicians Magón so hated, Zapatista delegates cannot go against what everyday people demand. They are bound to the decisions made in consensus at the most local level.[57] The Zapatistas have a slogan: "Here the people command and the government obeys". Possibly contrary to the rapidity Ricardo Flores Magón had in mind when imagining decision-making in the absence of authority, anti-authoritarian decisions often have to be made over several meetings. For example, during negotiations for a ceasefire with the Mexican state in the days following New Year's 1994, the functionaries of the EZLN made clear they would have to "interrupt the talks to consult the villages to which they were accountable".[58] When returning home to their villages, the functionaries were expected "not to talk, but to listen".[59] Indigenous Mayans have been making decisions collectively for generations without needing instruction from leftist intellectuals. Ultimately, the revolutionaries who came to the mountains in 1982 learned more from the indigenous villagers than the villagers learned from them.[60] Yet the Zapatistas represent a synthesis of indigenous practice and theory drawn from the political left. Subcomandante Marcos quoted Ricardo Flores Magón in speeches, noting that history was repeating itself, though the Zapatistas were facing an even more determined and

[57] Lynd, Grubačić, *Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History* (Oakland: PM Press, 2008), 5–6

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Marcos, "*Interview with Subcomandante Marcos,*" May 11, 1994.

At the heart of both Ricardo Flores Magón and the Zapatistas' analysis of the world of stark contrasts they found themselves in was an abolitionist critique of capitalism and an expropriative prescription for its cure. Both drew on the Marxist evaluation of capitalism as a system pitting two diametrically opposed classes against each other.[16] They saw the realities of this class struggle in daily life as *hacendados* or their corporate successors tended to subsume more and more of the communal sphere into the private one, dispossessing farmers and forcing them to sell their labor for a wage.[17] Finally, both saw their end goal as a world where the maxim "Everything for Everyone" is put into practice.[18] The main difference between the Zapatistas and Magónistas can be found in the speed at which the old society is to be destroyed and the new one is to be built. Ricardo Flores Magón, by all accounts, was indigenous himself and grew up moving between indigenous *ejidos.* Enrique, Ricardo's brother, recounted the land around them as being owned communally, and tended through shared work.[19] He explained before a Los Angeles jury that he and his brother were "communist anarchists" because they were "Indians, proletarians…witnesses of the great injustices".[20] Ricardo looked fondly on a idyllic memory of his time in indigenous communities that possessed and worked in common the land, governed not by authority but by mutual support.[21] He lamented the capitalist

[16] Ricardo Flores Magón, *Manifesto of the Mexican Liberal Party*, 1911; EZLN, *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (Chiapas: 2005).

[17] Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 211; EZLN, *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (Chiapas: 2005); Claudio Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 334.

[18] Lynd, Grubačić, *Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History* (Oakland: PM Press, 2008), 10.

[19] Claudio Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 39.

[20] Samuel Kaplan/Enrique Flores Magón, *Peleamos Contra La Injusticia* (Sinaloa: Autonomous University of Sinaloa, 1986), 185–186.

[21] Ricardo Flores Magón, *Regeneración*, September 2, 1911.

system, in which "each man had to compete with another to put a piece of bread in his mouth" for "snatching the natural riches" away from them "for the benefit of the neighboring landholders".[22] For Ricardo, the Mexican Liberal Party's 1911 manifesto was a "moral guide" to be adopted by the indigenous and all other proletarians.[23] Even as far back as the 1906 Manifesto, a much more reformist Liberal plan, he "called for restoring lands to the Yaqui in Sonora and to the Maya on the Yucatan peninsula".[24] As an anarchist, he would reject the idea that the government or anybody else should be the one to expropriate the lands for the Maya.[25] He would instead urge the Maya to seize the land themselves from the landowners, and he cheered on this very occurrence during the Mexican Revolution, where "the proletariat has taken possession of the land without waiting for a paternal government".[26] This is, of course, exactly what the Maya would do in 1994 under the banner of the EZLN.

Even before the rebellion, the indigenous Mayans living in the Lacandon Jungle began small-scale expropriations. During the ten years of military and social preparation leading up to the rebellion, campesinos went unarmed and seized land left untended by absentee landlords.[27] They built houses on the land and work it in common. For this, they faced brutal, and often collective, punishment.[28] The Maya had been given some of the rockiest and worst soil in the decades after the Mexican Revolution.[29] The best soil was owned by wealthy landlords running near-feudal operations in

[22] Ricardo Flores Magón, *Regeneración*, March 21, 1914.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Claudio Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 277.

[25] Ricardo Flores Magón, *Manifesto of the Mexican Liberal Party*, 1911

[26] Ibid.

[27] Maria, "*Interview with Major Ana Maria*," February 28, 1994.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 179.

in consensus. Anarchists in recent decades have drawn inspiration from indigenous groups, Quakers, and student assemblies and adopted consensus decision-making but most of Ricardo Flores Magón's contemporaries advocated direct democracy, usually ⅔ vote with anyone able to freely associate or disassociate with the group at any time.[52] Consensus allows all of the power to remain with those who are most affected and eliminates the tyranny of the majority. The Zapatistas adopted rotating delegates to coordinate between neighborhoods on a municipal level, and put into place additional delegates to coordinate municipalities on a territory-wide level.[53] Through long processes of consensus in which all community members on the most local level had to ratify every proposal, they worked out a term limit of 10–14 days for the delegates to the Junta Buen Gobierno, the territory-wide coordination meetings.[54] These stunningly short terms in positions of influence ensured that no one could establish power over anyone, hoard funds, or sway balance of resources to particular communities. Another way the Zapatistas kept these delegates accountable to their communities was by making them volunteers, compensated only by their neighbors taking over their home responsibilities while they are away, and ensuring that they can be immediately recalled if they go against the mandate of their community.[55] In other words, these "collective and removable" delegates formalize the Mayan tradition of "leading by obeying".[56]

On the surface, "leading by obeying" does not seem at all compatible with the anarchism that Ricardo Flores Magón es-

[52] Ibid, 186.

[53] EZLN, *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (Chiapas: 2005).

[54] Schools for Chiapas, *What Is Zapatista Autonomy?*, 2013.

[55] Lynd, Grubačić, *Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History* (Oakland: PM Press, 2008), 5–6; Marcos, "*Interview with Subcomandante Marcos,*" May 11, 1994.

[56] Marcos, "*Interview with Subcomandante Marcos,*" May 11, 1994; Lynd, Grubačić, *Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History* (Oakland: PM Press, 2008), 5–6

his ideas into practice in the long-term and true to anarchist form, he avoided being too prescriptive in his writings about what a free society might actually look like. Probably the part of the Mexican Liberal Party's ideas on anarchist communism that was least fleshed out was the way that decisions were to be made on a large scale non-hierarchically. One can only surmise that Flores Magón would propose some system of worker's councils and neighborhood councils, linked together through a bottom-up federalism of recallable delegates. In late 1915, Ricardo wrote an article in his newspaper called "New Life", a playful imagining of some potential actions people might take in a random city in the hours after a revolutionary wave kicked out the capitalists from the city.[47] In it, he imagines smooth and quick decisions made "when authority does not intervene".[48] He does not say exactly who comes to these decisions, but in the absence of authority, one has to assume that all who are affected can have a say. He envisions each neighborhood as an autonomous unit, with "an expropriated automobile" unifying "the resolutions made in each city neighborhood".[49] If neighborhoods are to work together, someone would have to take it upon themselves to be a mouthpiece for each neighborhood, what Ricardo calls "volunteer commissioners".[50] To be truly anarchist, these commissioners could not be allowed to accrue power over people, but Flores Magón never really laid out how they would formally operate. The Zapatistas came up with a possible solution in the early days following their uprising in 1994. They "made the road by walking"; only in practice could they work out the theoretical.[51] They built on the indigenous tradition of communal decision-making rooted

[47] Ricardo Flores Magón, *Regeneración*, November 13, 1915.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Lynd, Grubačić, *Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History* (Oakland: PM Press, 2008), 39.

conditions not much better than those before the Revolution.[30] Under the conditions of the North American Free Trade Agreement, set to go into effect on January 1, 1994, the article in the Mexican Constitution which protected traditional communal landholdings, ejidos, was nullified and NAFTA opened up the little holdings the Maya had to potential corporate exploitation.[31] There is a reason the EZLN chose the same day to rise up. Their first task was the expropriation of land that had been privatized. Between the land the Zapatistas freed by force and the land left open by fleeing owners, "some 340 private farms representing 50,000 hectares" were seized in the first six months of 1994 alone.[32] The EZLN, never ones to shy away from self-criticism, admitted that the progress of bringing the seized lands under collective work was slow going, but "the land problem" improved significantly in the years since then.[33]

Even the Zapatistas stopped short of Flores Magón's radical demands for a redistribution of all the means of life through thoroughgoing expropriations. Flores Magón would have welcomed the rebellion in Chiapas but would have criticized them for not going far enough.[34] He called for "all the industries…stores…and houses" to be taken over by those who work or live in them.[35] As long as any means of production, distribution, or exchange remained in the hands of a boss, people would still be exploited. While the Zapatistas did not totally abolish capitalist relations in their territories, they facilitated the continual growth of cooperative workplaces and collectively-worked plots. Faced with exploitation from all sides since the first Spanish ship landed in the "New World", indigenous people have had little choice but to build a culture of cooperation, the "only means of survival, resistance, dignity, and

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid, 180–181.
[32] Ibid, 211.
[33] EZLN, *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (Chiapas: 2005).
[34] Ricardo Flores Magón, *Manifesto of the Mexican Liberal Party*, 1911.
[35] Ibid.

defiance" in stark contrast to the "capitalist precept of 'a lot in the hands of the few'".[36] Collective work was an ancient practice that was strong in Chiapas prior to the rebellion, even noted by Ricardo Flores Magón in several writings.[37] During the clandestine period in the ten years prior to the uprising, "the compañeros combined our work in corn, bean, chicken and sheep production", doing "everything in work collectives, almost as if it were socialism."[38] After the rebellion, many *compañeros* "went to recuperated lands…in collectives to work and to plant".[39] These collectives were largely formed through self-organization out of necessity, not at the behest of any authority.[40] Collective work in Zapatista territory is not ordered by anybody; it comes out of a cohesion "born in community, of people living in each other's shadows… an intrinsic form of community harmony".[41] Fascinatingly, part of the produce of collective agricultural work has been put into a fund to pay for the transportation costs of community members who need to leave the village, buy seeds, or to cover the needs of the education promoters (teachers) and health promoters (doctors).[42]

It is unlikely that Ricardo Flores Magón could have predicted just how dependent the neoliberalization of capital would make the world, even rebel communities, on the market. The Zapatistas have not been able to abolish money, nor have they been able to completely isolate themselves from the capitalist economy. While internally much of their work is structured non-hierarchically, with the workers themselves, making the decisions over what is produced, how workers are paid, and the like, neoliberalism has destroyed the ability for the vast majority of people, including Zapatista cooperatives, to be self-sustaining. Neoliberal ideology has done this by incentivizing the destruction and/or privatization of resources and forcing localities into the export economy. The Mexican government has also carried out economic warfare on the Zapatistas by providing special resources to non-Zapatista indigenous communities and making it impossible for Zapatistas to compete with state-subsidized industries.[43] Despite these pressures, Zapatistas found ways to survive while resisting privatization by selling specialty products like coffee globally, protecting local seeds, and attracting workers by giving them autonomy.[44] Also, many communities opened cooperative stores, regional groceries that sell cheaply in bulk and are self-managed by community members.[45] The return to more widespread collective work also meant a blurring of gendered work, a goal reflected in the Women's Revolutionary Law, one of the first binding precedents put forth by Zapatista communities.[46] The unique circumstances faced by Mayans in the late 20th century meant that the Zapatistas have had to slowly build a society where "everything is for everyone", community by community. They have by no means reached Ricardo Flores Magón's goal of a fully stateless, classless, moneyless society, but they made major steps towards it in collectivizing land, the building of houses, and transportation.

The Neo-Zapatistas had to work out many of the practical points that for Magón only existed in the theoretical, adopting a form of consensus decision-making and rotating delegates for their self-organization. Magón was never able to successfully put

[36] EZLN, *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (Chiapas: 2005); Subcomandante Marcos, *Our Word is Our Weapon* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), 33.

[37] Ricardo Flores Magón, *Regeneración*, March 21, 1914.

[38] EZLN, *Autonomous Resistance, First Grade Textbook for the Course "Freedom According to the Zapatistas* (Chiapas: 2013), 32.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid, 33.

[41] Ramor Ryan, *Zapatista Spring: Anatomy of a Rebel Water Project & the Lessons of International Solidarity* (Oakland: AK Press, 2011), 64.

[42] EZLN, *Autonomous Resistance, First Grade Textbook for the Course "Freedom According to the Zapatistas,* 80.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid, 21, 80.