

Death of a Zapatista

Neoliberalism's Assault on Indigenous Autonomy

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...from the mountains of the Mexican Southeast...

On Friday May 2, 2014 an Indigenous Zapatista teacher, Jose Luis Solís López – known by his name ‘in the struggle’ as ‘Compañero Galeano’ – was ambushed and murdered. He was beaten with rocks and clubs, hacked with a machete, shot in the leg and chest, and as he lay on the ground gasping for air – he was executed by a final bullet to the head. The reason he was subjected to this callous violence varies depending upon what account is heard or read. But in truth, he was assassinated because he was Indigenous, because he was a teacher, because he was humble, and more specifically – because he was a Zapatista. And in a contemporary global system of neoliberal production and colonial governance, people like Galeano are deemed to be threats – threats that need to be killed in cold blood and suffer brutal deaths.

The assault on Galeano was also an attempt to antagonize the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) into reacting with violence themselves as retribution for the death of one of their *promotores de educación* (‘promoters of education’ – what teachers are called in the Zapatista system of horizontal education). The provocation was directly aimed at the EZLN in hopes of prompting them into engaging in armed conflict, which would thereby give the Mexican state reason to retaliate and attack Zapatista communities. However, despite the pain and rage that the Zapatistas are feeling, they continue to release statements calling for peace. And amidst the tears, sorrow, indignation, and sadness they now have due to one of their cherished teachers being slain at the hands of a few greedy cowards, they have stated they are not seeking revenge, nor blood, nor vengeance, but rather, they seek justice.

‘La Realidad’ – The Reality

In detail, Galeano was viciously murdered by nearly 20 members of differing paramilitary organizations in *La Realidad* (‘The Reality’), a Zapatista *Caracol* located in the Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas, Mexico. Once dead, the attackers (who are not part of the Mexican military, nor government, but rather, who are paid under-the-table and given kickbacks for their attempts at fracturing Zapatista communities) drug his body nearly 100 yards, dropped it on the ground, and left it to lay openly exposed. It was at this point that several Zapatista women, widely recognized for their fearlessness, courage, and dignity, went out under the face of further threat to carry Galeano’s body back to shelter.

In addition to the murder of Galeano, the paramilitaries injured 15 other unarmed Indigenous Zapatistas, and set about destroying a local school, health clinic, and water system. The attack has been identified by peace observers from the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center as a premeditated act of unprovoked aggression on the part of those men who carried out the assassination. Given the history of paramilitary activity in the region, as well as the account of a young Zapatista woman who was later verbally taunted, mocked, and bullied by the shooter, the slaying of Galeano can be seen as part of a larger strategy of low-intensity warfare that the federal, state, and local levels of the Mexican government (called the ‘Bad Government’ by the Zapatistas) are waging against the EZLN and its bases of support.

The underlying motivations of Galeano’s death, the state sanctioned counterinsurgency, and the militarized surveillance of Indigenous Zapatista communities are complex and multifaceted. In this way, it is important to understand that his assassination was not the result of a single,

isolated incident. Rather, Galeano's murder is part of an ongoing story of over 500 years of imperial conquest, the racist denigration of Indigenous people, the repression of rural peasants, and exploitative processes of accumulation by dispossession. Such socio-political dynamics not only continue to operate within Mexico, but they also remain part of an alienating status quo that continues to operate around the entire globe.

Indigenous Autonomy

The primary reason that Galeano and the other Zapatistas were targeted is because they are living a life of decolonial, anti-capitalist, collective resistance. A life that focuses on mutual aid, equitable gender relations, autonomous education, horizontal decision-making, and in addition, a life of shared laughter, dancing, and caring for one another. And during a time in which unimpeded capitalistic production, the rampant extraction of natural resources, the attainment of individual status, and unequal systems of patriarchal governance continue to be enabled and rewarded, living a life that rejects those things is something that hierarchical power sees fit to punish.

Additionally, the Zapatistas were subjected to this violent attack because they are exercising sovereignty as Indigenous people in the face of an omniscient neoliberal industrial complex, or more accurately, a sterile system of banal domination driven by individualistic notions of competition, private ownership, and ambition. The Zapatistas thereby continue to be encroached upon by military and state authorities because they collectively choose to rebuke and disregard the abusive structure of negligence that neoliberalism proves to be. And at this given moment, the success of the Zapatistas in contesting and opposing the ideals of neoliberalism has caused reactionary violence on the part of the colonial government.

The responses to the victories of the Zapatistas by those who wield power and privilege have been attempts at dividing Indigenous communities and pitting them against each other. This is done through the distribution of co-optative government 'assistance' to anyone who will disrupt the Zapatistas and their struggle. In their steadfast conviction against ever becoming dependent upon official authorities, the Zapatistas wholly refuse to accept any of the hollow amenities the state offers, referring to such superficial 'aid' packages as *migajas* ('crumbs'). In addition, the Mexican government also relentlessly endeavours to discipline, humiliate, disappear, and make suffer those Indigenous rebels who have had of the audacity to reject its neoliberal edicts and shallow offerings. Consequently, military encampments and state repression are intensified in the areas where Indigenous communities are based, primarily due to the democratic spaces and international solidarity that the Zapatistas have built.

And while those who profit most off of the spoils of neoliberalism continue to loathe the Zapatistas for their resilience, what proves to be a greater threat to the political and economic powers at be – is the autonomy of the Zapatistas. Autonomy is dangerous because it shows agents of capitalism and administrators of colonial domination that they are no longer necessary. Consequently, the liberation that the Zapatistas have fought for and won, along with their ability to create socially just spaces and sustain democracy within their own communities, continues to be subjected to heavy-handed, reactionary aggression by the neoliberal government. This is because neoliberalism, just as ongoing colonialism, fear being exposed – more precisely, they fear being exposed as incompetent, unjust, violent, and ultimately, useless. And this reality, is exactly what the Zapatistas have shown us all.

The Zapatista Dream

As Subcomandante Marcos said shortly after the Zapatista Uprising of 1994:

In our dream, children are children, and their work is to be children... I do not dream of the agrarian redistribution, of big mobilisations, of the fall of the government and elections, and the victory of a left-wing party, or whatever... I dream of the children, and I see them being children.

...it is Indigenous teachers like Galeano who make such dreams come true. In turn, the impacts of his murder and the attack on the Zapatista community of *La Realidad* are not only being felt in the mountains of southeast Mexico, but they are also resonating across borders. This is because the killing of Galeano brings to the fore the underlying currents of colonial hostility, masculine dominance, and neoliberal victimization that serve as the foundation of so many peoples' everyday lives throughout the world.

The reverberations of Galeano's death are also evident given the fact that during the last part of May, a time that sees the United States celebrate Memorial Day and Canada commemorate Victoria Day, thousands of Zapatistas, as well as their international sympathizers and supporters, traveled by caravan to a remote part of the Lacandon Jungle to memorialize a murdered community member. The gathering was a way of showing respect for Galeano – for his dignified work, his modest spirit, and the ultimate sacrifice he had to pay. It was also an offering of condolences to Zapatista communities and families, and it was a way to honour their beloved fallen teacher. In addition, the homage to Galeano also saw the enigmatic and clandestine persona of Subcomandante Marcos come to an end. In the middle of a dark misty night, in the heart of a shadowy moonlit jungle fog, Subcomandante Marcos delivered his final communiqué and noted that from this point on, he would cease to exist.

Much will be written, reported on, and said about the 'passing' of Subcomandante Marcos, but where the focus should remain, as intimated by the subcommander himself during his farewell address, is upon Galeano and going forward. Thus, the Zapatistas go forward. They go forward with their focus on dreams, children, democracy, liberty, justice, and 'creating a world where many worlds fit' ...and they do so remembering one of their own. Remembering a humble Indigenous teacher named Galeano, who despite having to die for being so, will never be forgotten. And even though neoliberalism and colonial governance will continue to inflict anguish, trauma, and suffering upon the Zapatistas, as well as countless other Indigenous communities throughout the world, in the words of Zapatistas themselves: *'La Lucha Sigue...'*

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