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## On visiting the Zapatista community of Oventic

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10 February 2015

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a destroyer of ‘chulel’, of nature and of community. It promotes an extreme individualisation and dehumanisation. The Zapatistas are on a path or a way of true living, emerging out of and realising chulel.

## References

The Sexta Declaration and many (many) more Zapatista comunicués are available at [palabra.ezln.org.mx/](http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/) and [enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/](http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/)

Efrain suggested that I read Carlos Lenkerforf, who has written on Mayan languages in ‘Los Hombres Verdaderos’ and ‘Cosmovision Maya’, or Sup. Marcos (Yvon le Bot), ‘El Sueno Zapatista’. He also recommended the journalistic pieces written by Herman Bellinghausen in the newspaper, *La Jornada*.

In terms of anarchist writings, Murray Bookchin’s *The Ecology of Freedom*, a terrific analysis of the ecological and democratic sensibilities of organic communities, resonates with some of the ideas presented here. Articles by WSM members who participated in the Zapatista Encuentros are also available. Finally, I recently interviewed Gustavo Esteva on the links between the Zapatistas and today’s social movements’ resistance in the ‘zombie time’ of capitalism.

## Contents

<i>On the Zapatista community</i> . . . . .	5
<i>On Corozonar, Bats’i k’op and Listening</i> . . . . .	6
<i>How are you like a tree? Where are our roots?</i> . . . . .	7
<i>What does the earth mean?</i> . . . . .	7
<i>What does work mean?</i> . . . . .	8
<i>What does education mean?</i> . . . . .	8
<i>Do you consider yourself an anti-capitalist? Please explain why.</i> . . . . .	9
<i>References</i> . . . . .	10

videos or stories in the mornings that we are then invited to reflect on in the afternoon as we take part in other activities in the community. We then write some reflections and discuss these the following morning.

***Do you consider yourself an anti-capitalist?  
Please explain why.***

One sunny day we are taken across a river and to the top of a nearby mountain ridge where we sit in a circle in the shade of the pine trees. Efrain lays out seven cards each stating a Zapatista organising principle. He emphasises that these are not a model to be applied but more like 'guides' that emerge from the indigenous way of seeing and living. These are:

- To propose, not to impose
- To represent, not to supplant
- To lower, not to elevate oneself
- To serve, not to serve oneself
- To obey, not to command
- To convince, not to win
- To create, not to destroy

The Zapatistas share a broad understanding of what it means to be anti-capitalist. In the Sexta Declaration, they side with the 'humble and simple people' of the world who are looking and struggling against and beyond neoliberalism, seeking dignity. Efrain says that an indigenous word '**chulel**' captures the living quality of life, all the life force or energy involved in the earth, in one's own life, even the potentialities latent in objects and things. Capitalism is

## *What does work mean?*

We all go to a **milpa** or small hillside plot one morning. We help clear the overgrowth from the small plants or aloes that Natalio's family cultivates. My academic hands are not used to using a pick or hoe; they blister quickly. After a short time, working together, we have managed to clear away quite a bit of the grassy overgrowth. Natalio then suggests we stop and we do. As we walk back, he explains that Zapatistas don't work to a schedule but rather work until their bodies tell them they should stop.

As we develop this idea, Natalio explains that there are many words for work. **A'mtel** is human work, all those activities for yourself, your family, your community that you decide to do. **Pak k'ak'al** approximates those activities that you do and hope to receive something similar in return. **P'iju'mtasbail** – is a local word for working in common, as a brother or sister. These are all forms of real work. The third form is '**Kanal**'. This is unreal work in which you are not acting for yourself. Instead, you have a boss and there is a process of control from above; you do not have options or choices. People who are exploited in this way are termed '**jkanal**'.

## *What does education mean?*

The Zapatista experience of state education – in which visiting teachers came occasionally and often proved violently disciplinarian – taught them that the state did not care about their children's education or their future. This form of education based on writing and book-learning dates from the Conquest and is described as '**el chan vun**'. Today, the Zapatistas share a different form of education or '**chanu'mtasbail**' in which all the community and the natural environment take on the role of 'teacher'. Our classes are held in the same spirit. They involve a series of questions or

Last November, I took part in a week-long language school at Oventic, Chiapas.<sup>1</sup> I spent the week living and learning with two US-based comrades – Laila, a tattoo artist and socialist/feminist from Memphis, and Michael, a housing rights activist from Baltimore – alongside the wider Zapatista community of Oventic. Our 'guides' for the week were our neighbours – Natalio and Paloma as well as Stephanie (who was learning to be a teacher) and Efrain (a linguist, philosopher and educator all rolled in to one). These were the people we met and spoke with every day. What follows are some reflections recorded along the way.

## *On the Zapatista community*

Oventic is located high in the mountains of Chiapas. It is hard not to feel small beside the great mountain ranges and underneath such a vast sky. The mornings are usually bright, clear and full of bird song. In the evening, fog rolls down the hills and shrouds us in a damp mist. By night, it is pitch black except for the stars. Life here, surprisingly, is very ordinary and, equally surprisingly, very special. In the mornings, from my privileged bunk bed, I can hear the sounds of a day to day routine beginning – men and women getting up before dawn, clothes washed by hand and hung on lines, the low singing of those getting ready for work in the fields and always the running and laughing of children. The work of the village is work but work in common, shared and collective. People talk with one

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<sup>1</sup> This was a rare opportunity. The Zapatistas started limiting outsider involvement to prevent government or military informers infiltrating and undermining their communities. They recently opened the language school as a means of enabling outsiders to demonstrate solidarity, of spreading the Zapatista word, of generating some revenue for the communities, and of providing the communities with a soft form of protection from military incursions. About a third of the Mexican army has been stationed in Chiapas since the Zapatista uprising of 1994. International solidarity networks play a role in limiting the army's violence.

another slowly and leisurely. The children are almost always playing.

In the evenings, when work is long over, there are sports and games on the basketball courts. One evening, we attend a community meeting in a nearby classroom where Efrain plays social movement media clips on a laptop and projector, showing news of the disappearance of the 43 student teachers of Ayotzinapah and the protests of dignity and rage overflowing Mexico. Another evening, Michael and I join the community assembled on the basketball courts and help bag and store the corn that the village will use to make tortillas. There is singing as we finish. Later that night, the three of us visitors take part in a music session where the community sang the Himno Zapatista along with many rebel and folk songs, including some Irish ones (my contribution).

### *On Corozonar, Bats'i k'op and Listening*

Zapatistas do not ask one another the Spanish 'como estas?', but rather the Tsotsil 'k'uxi jav o'on' – not 'how are you?', but rather 'what is your heart telling you?' This is one example of how language can emerge from (and shape our understanding of) a place or world. It also shows the emphasis that the Zapatistas place on listening – listening to our own hearts (*corozonar*) and to others'. Natalio explains to us that many Zapatistas use an indigenous language or 'bats'i k'op' (which translates as 'real words') to talk to one another. He emphasises at various points the need to live in the real world.

At the end of my stay, when Laila, Michael and I take the bus back to San Cristobal, we are bombarded with advertising for Coke and Pepsi, PRI and PAN, as well as the local radio chatter. Michael says it feels a bit like stepping out of the real world and back into 'The Matrix'.

### *How are you like a tree? Where are our roots?*

In our first conversation, Natalio, Stephanie, Michael and I read a story about Napí, an indigenous girl who likes to dream of another world in which she can fly with the birds of the forest. At one point in the story, we are told how Napí's mother, soon after Napí was born, buried her umbilical cord at the roots of a great tree, in keeping with local Mayan custom. We are invited to reflect on how Napí understood the world as a child, as part of a family and a community and as part of her natural environment.

Natalio then asks us, 'what happened to your umbilical cord?' He suggests that this question of 'where are our roots?' is a question for life. If we want to grow upwards and outwards, we must find and grow roots – in our communities and in our environment. Later, Efrain suggests that finding our roots in a community is a means of recuperating and recovering our personality from capitalism in a 'nosotr@s' or 'we ourselves', or in intersubjectivity.

### *What does the earth mean?*

The land is seen as **La Madre Tierra**, the fountain or source for all flora and fauna, for all our lives. Natalio tell us that there are many words for land. There is 'balumil' which is the entire world; 'osil' which is the land in which families live and work; and, in between, 'lum' or 'jteklum' which is the community's territory and practices. He explains that the Zapatistas cannot live without land. In the history of the indigenous, being without land meant being without any rights or recognition or dignity. So as to conquer the locals better, the ranch barons divided indigenous communities into 'mozos' (those without land) and 'valdios' (those workers with a little land). Today, the Zapatistas allocate small plots of land to families where they work as equals and share resources.