

A MOVEMENT OF MOVEMENTS?

Amid the general triumph of neo-liberalism over the past decade—its dynamic still unfolding across the world—pockets of resistance have survived from an earlier age: a handful of beleaguered states, sporadic industrial strikes, small radical parties. The opposition that has caught the headlines, however, is new in character—the ‘anti-globalization movement’, as both adherents and adversaries refer to it. The target that has unified spectacular actions in Seattle, Washington, Prague and Quebec are the international institutions pressing for an ever freer flow of commodities and capital—but not labour—around the globe. Behind these demonstrations lie a gamut of disparate organizations and forces: the strongest still rooted in national political contexts, the newest straining for kinds of internationalism that have not been seen since the eclipse of a revolutionary labour movement. In the monotony of a political order now virtually without significant conflict of ideas, any ruffling of the ideological consensus is liable to attract considerable—even disproportionate—media attention: a paradox to be welcomed, as involuntarily widening the reverberations of dissent.

Solidarity with the anti-capitalist core of the new resistance must, however, remain clear-eyed. Inflation of the scale or achievements of an embryonic movement is of no more service than indifference or neglect. An internationalism capable of inflicting real defeats on the hegemonic system would have to target the military and political apparatuses of globalization—the UN Security Council and its NATO subcontractor, in the Balkans, the Middle East and elsewhere—as much as the economic institutions of the WTO or IMF, bringing home the realities of American power behind the screens of multilateralism. But even such limited horizons are better than none. With this issue, NLR starts a series of interviews and texts from outposts of the new opposition. The founding date of its emergence was the first day of 1994, when NAFTA came into force and the EZLN occupied six towns of Chiapas in armed protest against it. A moral leadership extending beyond Mexico has remained with the Zapatistas ever since. Below, Subcomandante Marcos explains the strategy of the fight for indigenous rights after EZLN’s entry to Mexico City in March, prior to the gutting of the San Andrés Accords by the Mexican Congress; and touches on his own formation as a thinker. After the Zapatistas, it has been the North American front of protest that has been most active, and Naomi Klein one of its foremost voices. Here she argues for modesty and realism of self-description—not one movement, but a web of differing forces; not against globalization, but against privatization. The next issue will look at one of these forces, the US mobilizer Ruckus Society.

SUBCOMANDANTE MARCOS

THE PUNCH CARD
AND THE HOURGLASS

*Interviewed by Gabriel García Márquez
and Roberto Pombo*

Seven years after the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) declared that one day it would enter Mexico City in triumph, you are in the capital and the Zócalo is completely full. What did you feel when you climbed the dais and saw that spectacle?

IN KEEPING WITH THE Zapatista tradition of anti-climax, the worst place to see a demonstration in the Zócalo is from the platform.¹ The sun was fierce, there was a lot of smog, we all had a headache, and got very worried as we counted the people passing out in front of us. I commented to my comrade, Commander Tacho, that we should get on with it, or by the time we began to speak no one would be left in the square. We couldn't see all the way across it. The distance we had to keep from the crowd for security reasons was also an emotional one, and we didn't find out what had happened in the Zócalo until we read the newspaper reports and saw the photos the next day. But yes, in our view and in the assessment of others, we do think that the meeting was the culmination of a phase, that our words on that day were appropriate and our message the right one, that we disconcerted those who expected us to seize the Palace or call for general insurrection. But also those who thought that we would be merely poetic or lyrical. I think an effective balance was struck and that, one way or another, on 11 March the EZLN could be heard speaking in the Zócalo, not so much about 2001, but about something that is yet to be completed: a convic-

tion that the definitive defeat of racism will be turned into a State policy, an educational policy, into a feeling shared by the whole of Mexican society. As if this has already been settled, yet it still remains a short way off. As we soldiers say, the battle has been won, but a few skirmishes still remain to be fought. Finally I believe that the meeting in the Zócalo made it clear that it had been the right decision to put our weapons aside, that it was not our arms which brought us into dialogue with society, that the gamble on a peaceful mobilization was sensible and fruitful. The Mexican State has still to understand this, the government in particular.

You've used the expression 'as we soldiers say'. To a Colombian, accustomed to the way our guerrillas talk, your language doesn't sound very soldierly. How military is your movement, and how would you describe the war in which you have been fighting?

We were formed in an army, the EZLN. It has a military structure. Subcomandante Marcos is the military chief of an army. But our army is very different from others, because its proposal is to cease being an army. A soldier is an absurd person who has to resort to arms in order to convince others, and in that sense the movement has no future if its future is military. If the EZLN perpetuates itself as an armed military structure, it is headed for failure. Failure as an alternative set of ideas, an alternative attitude to the world. The worst that could happen to it, apart from that, would be to come to power and install itself there as a revolutionary army. For us it would be a failure. What would be a success for the politico-military organizations of the sixties or seventies which emerged with the national liberation movements would be a fiasco for us. We have seen that such victories proved in the end to be failures, or defeats, hidden behind the mask of success. That what always remained unresolved was the role of people, of civil society, in what became ultimately a dispute between two hegemonies. There is an oppressor power which decides on behalf of society from above, and a group of visionaries which decides to lead the country on the correct path and ousts the other group from power, seizes power and then also decides on behalf of society. For us that is a struggle between hegemonies, in which the winners are good and the losers bad, but for the rest of society things don't basically change. The EZLN has reached a point where it has been overtaken by Zapatismo. The 'E' in the acronym has shrunk, its hands

¹ This interview was first published in *Revista Cambio*, Bogotá, 26 March 2001.

have been tied, so that for us it is no handicap to mobilize unarmed, but rather in a certain sense a relief. The gun-belt weighs less than before and the military paraphernalia an armed group necessarily wears when it enters dialogue with people also feels less heavy. You cannot reconstruct the world or society, nor rebuild national states now in ruins, on the basis of a quarrel over who will impose their hegemony on society. The world in general, and Mexican society in particular, is composed of different kinds of people, and the relations between them have to be founded on respect and tolerance, things which appear in none of the discourses of the politico-military organizations of the sixties and seventies. Reality, as always, presented a bill to the armed national liberation movements of those days, and the cost of settling it has been very high.

You also seem to differ from the traditional Left in the social sectors that you represent. Is that so?

Broadly speaking, there were two major gaps in the movement of the revolutionary Left in Latin America. One of them was the indigenous peoples, from whose ranks we come, and the other was the supposed minorities. Even if we all removed our balaclavas we would not be a minority in the same way that homosexuals, lesbians, transsexuals are. These sectors were not simply excluded by the discourses of the Latin American Left of those decades—and still current today—but the theoretical framework of what was then Marxism–Leninism disregarded them, indeed took them to be part of the front to be eliminated. Homosexuals, for example, were suspect as potential traitors, elements harmful to the socialist movement and state. While the indigenous peoples were viewed as a backward sector preventing the forces of production . . . blah, blah, blah. So what was required was to clean out these elements, imprisoning or re-educating some, and assimilating others into the process of production, to transform them into skilled labour—proletarians, to put it in those terms.

Guerrillas normally speak in the name of majorities. It seems surprising that you speak in the name of minorities, when you could do so in the name of the poor or exploited of Mexico as a whole. Why do you do this?

Every vanguard imagines itself to be representative of the majority. We not only think that is false in our case, but that even in the best of cases it is little more than wishful thinking, and in the worst cases an outright

usurpation. The moment social forces come into play, it becomes clear that the vanguard is not such a vanguard and that those it represents do not recognize themselves in it. The EZLN, in renouncing any claim to be a vanguard, is recognizing its real horizon. To believe that we can speak on behalf of those beyond ourselves is political masturbation. In some cases it is not even that, because there is no pleasure in this onanism—at most, that of pamphlets read only by those who produce them. We are trying to be honest with ourselves and some might say that this is a matter of human decency. No. We could even be cynical and say that the honest admission that we only represent the indigenous Zapatista communities of one region of the Mexican South-East has paid off. But our discourse has reached the ears of many more people than those we represent. This is the point we have reached. That's all. In the speeches we made in the course of our march to the capital, we told people—and ourselves—that we could not and should not try to lead the struggles we encountered on our journey, or fly the flag for them. We had imagined that those below would not be slow to show themselves, with so many injustices, so many complaints, so many wounds . . . In our minds we had formed the image that our march would be a kind of plough, turning the soil so that all this could rise from the ground. We had to be honest and tell people that we had not come to lead anything of what might emerge. We came to release a demand, that could unleash others. But that's another story.

Were the speeches you gave along the route improvised from town to town until the address in Mexico City, or did you design them from the outset as a sequence, such that the last was not necessarily the strongest?

Look, there is an official version and a real version. The official story is that we saw at each stop what we had to do. The real story is that we wove this discourse together over the course of the last seven years. A moment arrived when the Zapatismo of the EZLN was overtaken by many developments. Today we are not expressing what we were before 1994, or in the first days of 1994 when we were fighting; we are acting on a series of moral commitments we made in the last seven years. In the end we didn't manage to plough the land, as we had hoped. But the mere act of our walking on it was enough to bring all these buried feelings to the surface. In every town square, we told people: 'We have not come to lead you, we have not come to tell you what to do, but to ask for your help.' Even so, we received during our march dockets of complaints going back

to the time before the Mexican Revolution, given to us in the hope that finally someone might resolve the problem. If we could sum up the discourse of the Zapatista march to date, it would be: 'No one is going to do it for us.' The forms of organization, and the tasks of politics, need to be changed for that transformation to be possible. When we say 'no' to leaders, we are also saying 'no' to ourselves.

You and the Zapatistas are at the peak of your prestige. The PRI has just fallen in Mexico, there is a bill before Congress to create an Indigenous Statute, and the negotiations you have demanded can begin. How do you view this scene?

As a struggle between a clock operated by a punch card, which is Fox's time, and an hourglass, which is ours. The dispute is over whether we bend to the discipline of the factory clock or Fox bends to the slipping of the sand. It will be neither the one nor the other. Both of us need to understand, we and he, that we have to assemble another clock by common agreement, that will time the rhythm of dialogue and finally of peace. We are on their terrain, the arena of power, where the political class is in its element. We are there with an organization that is perfectly ineffectual when it comes to playing politics, at least that kind of politics. We are gauche, stammering, well-intentioned. Opposite us are skilled players of a game they know well. This too will be a dispute, over whether the agenda will be dictated by the political class or shaped by our requirements. Once again, I think it will be neither one nor the other. When we waged war we had to challenge the government, and now in order to build peace we have to challenge not only the government but the entire Mexican State. There is no table at which to sit in dialogue with the government. We have to construct it. The challenge now is to convince the government that we need to make that table, that it should sit down and that it stands to gain by doing so. And that if it doesn't, it will lose.

Who should be at that table?

The government on one side and ourselves on the other.

Hasn't Fox in practice accepted that table when he says he wants to talk to you, and will receive you in the Presidential Palace or wherever you please?

What Fox is saying is that he wants his slice of the media cake, in what has become a popularity contest, rather than a dialogue or negotiation. Fox is looking for a photo opportunity, to maintain his grip on the media. But a peace process is not to be constructed by a spectacle, but by serious signals, sitting down at a table and dedicating yourself to a real dialogue. We are ready to talk to Fox, if he takes personal responsibility for that dialogue and sees the negotiation with us through to the end. But we would ask him: who is going to run the country while you are meeting with us, which will be an arduous business? I don't have to explain this to anyone from Colombia, where you know from your own experience that the processes of dialogue and negotiation in an armed conflict are extremely tricky, and impossible for the head of the Executive to dedicate himself to full-time. Let Fox designate a representative of his government with whom we can construct a dialogue. There's no hurry. A handshake with Vicente Fox is not among our wet dreams.

During that lengthy process, will you carry on as you are, dressed as a guerilla, on a university campus? What's your average day like just now?

I get up, I give interviews and then it's time to go to bed [laughter]. We hold discussions with various of the groups I have mentioned: a large number of worlds or sub-worlds—the difference depends on how they are persecuted or marginalized—that have been affected by our message. We are sitting at two tables, swivelling between them on one of those chairs on wheels I remember from my youth. At the moment we are at one table with Congress and at another with the communities of Mexico City. But it worries us that Congress is treating us as it would anyone who asks to be seen, and is told to wait because it is attending to other matters. If that's the case, it will cause a lot of damage, because it's not only the recognition of indigenous rights that is at issue now. The knock-on effect would hit many people. People will not accept being looked in the eye only on election day. Besides which, it would send a signal to other, more radical politico-military groups, which have grown up under a banner that proclaims any political negotiation a form of surrender.

In parentheses, you said there were swivel chairs when you were young. How old are you?

I'm 518 . . . [laughter]

Does the dialogue you propose aim to create new mechanisms of popular participation in decision-making, or do you support government decisions you consider necessary for the country?

Dialogue means simply agreeing rules for the dispute between us to shift to another terrain. The economic system is not on the table for discussion. It's the way we're going to discuss it that is at issue. This is something Vicente Fox needs to understand. We are not going to become 'Foxistas' at that table. What the table has to achieve is to allow us to emerge with dignity, so that neither I nor anyone else has to go back and don all that military paraphernalia again. The challenge before us is to construct not only the table, but also our interlocutor. We need to make a statesman, not a marketing product designed by image consultants, out of him. It won't be easy. War was easier. But in war much more becomes irremediable. In politics, remedies can always be found.

Your attire is a little strange: a threadbare scarf tied at the neck and a cap that's falling apart. But you are also carrying a torch, which you don't need here, a communications device which looks very sophisticated, and a watch on each wrist. Are they symbols? What does all this mean?

The torch is because we have been put into a lightless pit and the radio is for my image consultants to dictate my answers to questions from journalists. No. More seriously: this is a walkie-talkie which allows me to communicate with security and with our people in the jungle in case there is a problem. We have received several death threats. The scarf was red and was new when we took San Cristóbal de las Casas seven years ago. And the cap is the one I had when I arrived in the Lacandón jungle eighteen years ago. I arrived in that jungle with one watch and the other dates from when the ceasefire began. When the two times coincide it will mean that Zapatismo is finished as an army and that another stage, another watch and another time has started.

How do you see the Colombian guerrillas and the armed conflict of our country?

From here I see very little. Just what the media filter through: the current process of dialogue and negotiation, and its difficulties. So far as I can tell, it's a very traditional kind of dialogue—it's not innovative. Both

sides are simultaneously sitting at the table and bringing their military forces into play to gain an advantage at the table. Or vice versa, because we don't know what each of them has in mind. Perhaps the table offers advantages for military confrontations. We don't pay much attention to the accusations of links to drug-trafficking because it wouldn't be the first time such charges are made and then they turn out not to be true. We give the Colombians the benefit of the doubt. We don't label them good or bad, but we do keep our distance from them, as we do with other armed groups in Mexico, in so far as we consider it unethical to approve of any measures to secure the victory of the revolution. Including, for example, kidnapping civilians. The seizure of power does not justify a revolutionary organization in taking any action that it pleases. We do not believe that the end justifies the means. Ultimately, we believe that the means are the end. We define our goal by the way we choose the means of struggling for it. In that sense, the value we give to our word, to honesty and sincerity, is great, although we occasionally sin out of naïveté. For example, on 1 January 1994, before attacking the Army, we announced that we were going to attack. They didn't believe us. Sometimes this yields results and sometimes it doesn't. But it satisfies us that, as an organization, we are creating an identity as we go along.

Do you think it's possible to negotiate a peace in the middle of a war, as in Colombia?

It's very easy, and very irresponsible, to offer opinions from here on what is happening there. A process of dialogue and negotiation is unlikely to be successful if each party remains intent on winning. If one side uses negotiations as a test of force to see if it can defeat the other, sooner or later the dialogue will fail. In that event, the field of military confrontation is simply being transferred to the negotiating table. For dialogue and negotiation to succeed, both parties have to proceed from the assumption that they cannot defeat their opponent. They need to find a way out that means a victory for both—or, in the worst of cases, a defeat for both. But that brings the confrontation as it is to an end. Of course, this is difficult—above all for movements which have been active for many years, like the Colombian guerrillas. Much harm has been done on both sides and many debts have yet to be settled, but I believe it is never too late to try.

Do you still find time to read, in the midst of all these distractions?

Yes, because if not . . . what would we do? In previous armies, soldiers used their time to clean their weapons and stock up ammunition. Our weapons are words, and we may need our arsenal at any moment.

Everything you say, in form and content, suggests a considerable literary education of a traditional kind. Where does it come from?

From childhood. In our family, words had a very special value. Our way of approaching the world was through language. We learnt to read, not so much in school, as in the columns of newspapers. Early on, my mother and father gave us books that disclosed other things. One way or another, we became conscious of language—not as a way of communicating, but of constructing something. As if it were a pleasure more than a duty. In the underground, unlike the world of bourgeois intellectuals, the word is not what is most valued. It is relegated to a secondary position. It was when we got to the indigenous communities that language hit us, like a catapult. Then you realize that you lack the words to express many things, and that obliges you to work on language. To return time and again to words, to put them together and take them apart.

Could it not be the other way round—that a command of words was what made possible a new phase of struggle?

It's as if it all goes through a blender. You don't know what you tossed in first, and what you end up with is a cocktail.

Can we ask about your family?

It was middle class. My father, the head of the family, taught in a rural school in the time of Cárdenas when, as he used to say, teachers had their ears cut off for being communists. My mother also taught in a school in the countryside, then moved and entered the middle class: it was a family without financial difficulties. All of this was in the provinces, where the society pages of the local newspaper are the cultural horizon. The outside world was Mexico City and its bookshops—the great attraction of coming here. Occasionally there would be provincial book fairs, where we could get hold of something interesting. My parents introduced us to García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Monsiváis, Vargas

Llosa (regardless of his ideas), to mention only a few. They set us to reading them. *A Hundred Years of Solitude* to explain what the provinces were like at the time. *The Death of Artemio Cruz* to show what had happened to the Mexican Revolution. *Días de guardar* to describe what was happening in the middle classes. As for *La ciudad y los perros*, it was in a way a portrait of us, but in the nude. All these things were there. We went out into the world in the same way that we went out into literature. I think this marked us. We didn't look out at the world through a news-wire but through a novel, an essay or a poem. That made us very different. That was the prism through which my parents wanted me to view the world, as others might choose the prism of the media, or a dark prism to stop you seeing what's happening.

Where does Don Quixote come in all that reading?

I was given a book when I turned 12, a beautiful cloth edition. It was *Don Quixote*. I had read it before, but in those children's editions. It was an expensive book, a special present which must still be out there somewhere. Next came Shakespeare. But the Latin American boom came first, then Cervantes, then García Lorca, and then came a phase of poetry. So in a way you [looking at GGM] are an accessory to all this.

Did the existentialists and Sartre come into this?

No. We arrived late at all that. Strictly speaking we were already, as the orthodox would say, very corrupted by the time we got to existential literature and, before that, to revolutionary literature. So that when we got into Marx and Engels we were thoroughly spoilt by literature; its irony and humour.

Didn't you read any political theory?

Not to begin with. We went straight from the alphabet to literature, and from there to theoretical and political texts, until we got to high school.

Did your classmates believe that you were or might be a communist?

No, I don't think so. Perhaps the most they called me was a little radish: red outside and white inside.

What are you reading at the moment?

Don Quixote is always at my side, and as a rule I carry García Lorca's *Romancero Gitano* with me. *Don Quixote* is the best book of political theory, followed by *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. There is no better way to understand the Mexican political system, in its tragic and comic aspects: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Don Quixote*. Better than any political columnist.

Do you write by hand or on a computer?

On a computer. Except on this march, when I had to write a lot by hand because there was no time to work. I write a rough draft, and then another and another and another. It sounds silly, but by the time I finish I'm at about the seventh version.

What book are you writing?

I was trying to produce a folly, which was to try to explain ourselves to ourselves from the standpoint of ourselves—which is virtually impossible. What we have to relate is the paradox that we are. Why a revolutionary army is not aiming to seize power, why an army doesn't fight, if that's its job. All the paradoxes we faced: the way we grew and became strong in a community so far removed from the established culture.

If everyone knows who you are, why the mask?

A touch of coquetry. They don't know who I am, but it doesn't matter to them anyway. At stake is what Subcomandante Marcos is, not who he was.