

The Zapatista Dream

From 1983 to 1993

Yvon Le Bot

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Contents

The Guerrilla Foco	3
The Indigenous Elite	3
Conditions Ripen	4
The EZLN Defeated	5
An Army is Born	6
From the Conquest to the CCRI	6

El Sueño Zapatista (The Zapatista Dream) is a collection of interviews by Yvon Le Bot in collaboration with Maurice Najman with Subcomandante Marcos, Mayor Moises, and Comandante Tacho of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). It has been published in French by Editions de Seuil and in Spanish by Plaza & Janés (Enrique Granados 86–88, 08008, Barcelona, Spain). It details the history of the EZLN, and its political development. We hope that these excerpts will generate interest in publishing an English edition of the book. The following extracts are all from interviews with Subcomandante Marcos.

—the Editors

The Guerrilla Foco

The Zapatismo of 1994 has behind it three main components: a political-military group, a group of politicized and very experimental indigenous people, and the indigenous movement of the Selva (jungle). A starting point would be the Marxist-Leninist political-military organization with a style very similar in its military profile—not politically, just militarily—to the national liberation guerrilla organizations of Central and South America. An organization based on the idea that the possibilities for peaceful struggle were exhausted, that it was necessary to confront the authorities, to defeat them and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat and of communism. At its start this clandestine organization was very close to the urban one. It's an organization with a composition that is majority middle class—almost no workers, a few campesinos and no indigenous people.

Its political analysis foresaw a radicalization and polarization of the different elements of Mexican society—the state on one side, the people on the other—and that this polarization was going to result in a civil war. On the military plane this posed a new possibility—that didn't consist of preparing for war, for initiating a war, but rather to prepare for when the war breaks out. It's an organization that doesn't intend to initiate combat but rather to appear when it becomes necessary. The idea is that, in this case, the people were going to need an armed group to defend themselves, to fight, to resist the actions of the Federal Army, of the government's army.

This group had these characteristics: it is politically healthy, it is militarily healthy, and it is very modest. Being submerged allowed it to survive the repression that groups that were openly engaged in military actions were suffering.

The Indigenous Elite

On the other hand we have an indigenous movement with two main elements: a very isolated group, that is the indigenous people of the Selva, and another movement that we could call the politicized indigenous elite, with a great organizational capacity, with a very rich experience of political struggle. They were in practically all the political organizations of the left that there were then and they were familiar with all the prisons in the country. And these groups entered into contact with each other.

The EZLN's plan for the future was to build a regular army, thinking already in terms of its command structure, its articulation, its territory, its organic character. This was proposed and the

politicized indigenous elite offered to find a place where this could be done without the danger of being detected. This is when this group decided to establish itself in the Selva Lacandona. It went in and founded the EZLN, in November 1983, in an encampment that was called “The Nightmare.”

We went to learn to live in the mountains, to learn to fight, and to wait for some day when the revolution would explode in Mexico. Already back then we had established that the revolution was not our personal possession, but that others were going to make it and we were going to help. In military terms, during these months in the mountains, as we had no foreign support nor advisors, nor anything, we had to resort to training ourselves militarily based on the experiences of the Latin American guerrillas that we had read about, but above all based on the guerrilla and counter-guerrilla manuals of the US military. We learned how to be guerrillas in the manuals of the Rangers, the SIESPOS, the SEALs, and all the commando-type structures in the US Army and NATO. Here we learned what the guerrilla was, what a regular army was, we learned this from the military history manuals. From the epoch of the War of Independence we learned about the army of Morelos and above all from the Revolution about Villa’s Northern Division and Zapata’s Liberating Army of the South. Accordingly we organized into units, sections, companies, battalions, divisions, army corps, army, the great army, the same as their command structures. Our organizational plan is very close to that of the armies of Villa and Zapata.

Conditions Ripen

This guerrilla group was isolated. For that reason it failed to detect other things that were beginning to develop in the zone—the sharpening conditions of repression, of life, of misery—that would allow this indigenous movement, this indigenous mass that we now see, to become ready to enter into contact with the guerrilla group. But this contact between the communities and the armed group—this group of urban origin, the guerrilla of the university—didn’t happen with people coming from the city. These people came from the mountains, had lived in the mountains three, four or five years. For the indigenous people this signified a lot.

This politicized indigenous group began to talk with some of the leaders of the indigenous communities that were conscious of the armed struggle. This was to coincide with the growth of the Guardias Blancas and acts of repression, above all in the Selva and in the North of Chiapas, where the indigenous people naturally had to defend themselves. At the time that the armed struggle was proposed to them they said “Well, if they are going to teach me to fight and they are going to get weapons, that’s what I need.” It’s a very practical interest, very immediate, of survival, that allowed this first contact between the indigenous communities and the political military group—and from this impact would emerge what we now know as Zapatismo, not that of right now, because that already has other ingredients, but the Zapatismo that emerged in January 1994.

This intermediary group had talked with their families, also indigenous people—Tzeltals, Tzotziles, Choles, and Tojolabales, and these families decided to send their youngest children to the mountains to become guerrillas. Here we had this political-military group with the indigenous ingredient within it. After a little while—I’m speaking of 1984—we ceased having a majority of Ladinos and Mestizos, and the indigenous people became the majority. At the time that contact was made with the communities the indigenous element was already the majority in the political-military organization, even if this wasn’t reflected in the command structure. It was re-

flected in its internal life, because already there had been an initial cultural shock that had been necessary to assimilate and resolve: to learn the language, but to learn something more than the language; the use of the language, of the symbols of what different things represented, what the sense of the symbol and their meaning for the communities and all that.

This is a kind of translation enriched by the perspective of political transition. The idea of a more just world, everything that is socialism in its broadest features, but digested and enriched with humanitarian, ethical and moral elements that come more from the indigenous people themselves. Quickly the revolution was transformed into something essentially moral; ethical. More than the redistribution of wealth or the expropriation of the means of production, the revolution became the possibility that to be human was to have the space for dignity. Dignity started to be a very strong word. (This wasn't our contribution), This wasn't a contribution of the urban element, the communities contributed this

The EZLN Defeated

In our perspective they were exploited people that had to be organized and shown the road. Put yourself in our place: we were the light of the world. They were blind people who had to open their eyes. This didn't change until the translator, Old Antonio, appeared. At the time that the communities entered into contact with us someone emerged who seemed like a literary character, but who was real, (who existed). That old man became the link with the communities, with their world, and with the part that was most indigenous. By way of him, by way of those political leaders and leaders of the communities, the EZLN began to understand the history of [the communities] political roots, of their consciousness, of their historical consciousness. What became clear was that we were not talking with an indigenous movement that was waiting for a savior, but rather with an indigenous movement with a long tradition of struggle, with a lot of experience, very resistant, very intelligent as well, to which we would simply serve as something like an armed wing. In this—we're speaking of the period 85–87—we are learning. We quickly realized that there is a reality for which we were not prepared, we discovered the indigenous world, we saw that they weren't just people interchangeable with any other, that they weren't waiting for us, that we hadn't come to teach them what we had developed for whatever other sector. We thought that it was the same to talk with a proletarian, with a campesino, with an office worker, or with a student. Everybody was going to understand the word of the revolution. And then we were confronted by a new world for which we had no response.

The virtue of this military organization was in recognizing that it didn't have an answer and that it had to learn. That was the first defeat of the EZLN, the most important and it marked what was to follow. When the EZLN faces something new and recognizes that it has no solution for that problem, that it has to wait and learn, that it no longer is the teacher. All we had to offer before this reality was a ton of questions, but no answers.

And here began the process of transformation of the EZLN from an army of the revolutionary vanguard to an army of the indigenous communities—an army that is one part of the indigenous movement of resistance among many other forms of struggle. We didn't understand this, for us the armed struggle was the backbone, the highest stage, etceteras. I think what allowed the EZLN to survive and grow was accepting that defeat. If the EZLN had not accepted it, it would have been isolated, it would have remained small, the EZLN that emerged on January 1, 1994 would

never have been born. Its an army of thousands of combatants, even if poorly armed they are thousands, and to find thousands of people ready to fight until death is not an easy thing.

It is very difficult when you have a theoretical schema that explains all of society to you and you come to society and find that your schema explains nothing. It's a difficult thing to accept: to recognize that we had dedicated all of our lives to a project and that this project is fundamentally crippled.

The situation in the city was grave. The urban part of the organization didn't grow, it continued to stagnate. What then happened was that the indigenous youth who had joined us in the mountains and that had to learn medicine, communications, carpentry—all that an army needs to maintain itself, we sent them to the city and with them we sent the virus. It was as if the tactical indianization of the EZLN had moved and contaminated the urban part of the EZLN and it was indianized as well. The majority of the members of the army were indigenous and the majority of the urban structure, which was very small—I'm talking about a few dozen people—was also of indigenous origin. Thus it produced the contamination, even if it had less effect. We really suffered a process of re-education of remodeling. As if they had disarmed us. As if they had taken apart all the elements we had—Marxism, Leninism, socialism, urban culture, poetry, literature—everything that formed a part of us and also things we didn't know we had. They disarmed us and then returned our arms to us, but in a different form. And this was the only way to survive.

An Army is Born

Until 1988 our contact with the communities was still sporadic. The people of the villages started to go to the mountains, to the encampments, to the celebrations of April 10, November 17, and September 16, the historical celebrations of Mexico or the EZLN. Still we didn't go to the villages, except in hiding and at night. There weren't "controlled" villages as we say, villages where everybody are Zapatistas like here.

In any case in that period from 89 to 90 we went from hundreds to thousands of combatants. And the villages in which some families had supported us came to be entire villages, canyons, areas, regions of areas that were completely Zapatista. We could walk in a canyon, day or night, entirely among compañeros, knowing who came and who went, we had absolute control over what occurred in the canyons in those years. It was a Zapatista boom, a phenomenal expansion so all out of proportion such that we quickly began to fill the organizational chart that had been a dream or a nightmare in '83-'84: companies, battalions, divisions: that army quickly became possible. We began to organize it as a people's army. That is to say an army for fighting and for production, that was not only prepared for combat, but that worked in the service of the communities. Our army worked collective cornfields, it had what we have now built in the Aguascalientes—clinics, meeting centers, sports fields—where the military units would come together to work and build a playground, things in the service of the community.

From the Conquest to the CCRI

In 1992 we didn't perceive a question that was very important to the indigenous communities, that was the character of the Conquest, what the discovery of America signified, as they were

then celebrating the 500 years since the discovery of America and planning big official celebrations. Within the indigenous movement, I don't know about nationally, but at least locally, a kind of restlessness started over what this signified and the necessity of demonstrating, and they set out to remember the 500 years as they really had been, as a movement of resistance against domination. The process of radicalization accelerated, the villages now came to a point of no return on the question of going to war, expressed through the indigenous leaders, the leaders of the communities and of the regions that will later become the CCRI (Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee). The indigenous leaders proposed to start the war in 92. The military leadership, in agreement with the comandancia, of which I was a part then, we put forward that the conditions weren't there, that the international situation wasn't favorable, that the national situation as well was unfavorable for any attempt at change, even more for armed struggle.

Together we decided that it was necessary to consult the people: this was the first consulta in the villages on what was going to be the Zapatistas line of work. This is in the second half of 1992 and it coincided with the indigenous mobilization for the celebration of the 500 years, the big October 12 march on San Cristobal that the indigenous people posed as the last civil appearance of the indigenous movement that has already become Zapatista.

At this time, in these communities the consulta happened: an explanation was made in each village about the conditions in the communities, in the ethnic groups, what the international situation was, the national situation, and the question to hand was whether it was time to start the war. In these months, in September, October and beginning of November as well, the consulta was made in 400 or 500 communities of the four ethnic groups, among the Tzotziles, Choles, Tojolabales, and Tzeltales, in Los Altos, the North, and the Selva, and the majority of the population participated in this consulta: the women for the first time as a special sector, and the youth, who before had not participated in decisions of the communities, and even less those of this type. It was a kind of referendum by means of recording each of the proceedings, and after the march in October the votes were counted.

A broad majority came out definitely in favor of starting the war immediately, and the communities gave the formal order to the EZLN to make the war together with them. This provoked problems for us in logistical, tactical, and strategic terms. We weren't an army prepared to take the offensive. From when we were a political-military organization, we set out that war was going to come at some moment, but not that we were going to look for it. And after our contact with the communities we had conceived our military role in defensive terms. We supposed that the communities would be attacked, that the army would come in or discover us, or that there would be evictions and we would have to resist, to fight the Guardias Blancas and behind the Guardias Blancas would come the police and behind them would come the army. Therefore we had a defensive military plan that covered all of Las Cañadas and the most important points in Los Altos.

When we had the results of the voting there was a meeting in December 1992 between the leaders of the indigenous communities and the EZLN comandancia in the mountains in which the necessity of changing the decision-making structure in light of the plan for war was put forward. The indigenous communities must take control over the whole organization of the EZLN, even in the city, and it was posed that it was necessary that the war not be a local one, but rather in the whole national territory, or at least in all the states where the EZLN was to be found. In this moment—I'm speaking of the end of 1992—the comandancia of the EZLN remained formally in the hands of the political-military organization, but in reality it already resided in the

leadership of the communities, those we then called the responsables of each zone and ethnicity, of the three regions, and of the four ethnicities.

The CCRI was born in January 1993. There was a meeting with representatives of the compañeros from the city, of the regular troops of the insurgents, and of the villages. At this meeting the possibility of the war was discussed, because it was an initiative of the indigenous communities and it didn't resonate in the city. If we looked at the proposal with skepticism, they looked at it with even more, because they had a better handle on information. Everything was in place for it to be a complete fiasco. Therefore, after a long discussion that lasted several days it was decided that the political-military organization would cede control, that it had to opt for a democratic mechanism for making decisions in which the greater part of the organization would decide on the course of action and would carry it out, and the greater part of the organization was the communities. Then the indigenous representatives, the leaders, approved the results of the consulta, voting for war, as the villages, the communities, had already voted.

Thus they took formal command of the EZLN. They constituted themselves as the comandancia of the army, and the responsables of the ethnic groups and the zones took the name and the rhythm of work of the Revolutionary Indigenous Clandestine Committee (CCRI). Then the leaders of the four indigenous ethnic groups met for the first time, now as leaders, now with the title of comandantes to resolve to work together and make war as indigenous people and not as one ethnicity, but as the four principal ethnicities of the state. The general character of the war was also established, that it was for national demands, not just indigenous ones, but national ones. The principal demands, the banners of the struggle are: democracy, liberty, and justice.

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