

The Future Is Now

Zapatista Memories of the Future

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The question as to how we can imagine a future that isn't "disposable," where the violence of neoliberal market forces does not reduce life to a mere object in service to the greed of a select few and where violence (both psychic and actual) is no longer the principle force driving how we understand ourselves, has become the principle concern of the left from Slavoj Žižek, Alan Badiou, Peter Hallward and Jodi Dean (among others) looking to [new forms of communism](#) in order to (paraphrasing Frederick Jameson) escape from the situation where it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism to the [#Accelerationism](#)'s attempts to push through capitalism and win back the future. However, these new theoretical stands of thought either lack critical stances on the violence that their forms of movement would involve ([#Accelerationism](#)) or else problematically celebrate this violence (as found in Badiou, Žižek and Hallward). In addition to this, neither strand of thought is grounded in a clear practice.

There is however, an often overlooked movement that emerged from the (post) colonial situation in Mexico and through a beautiful merger of theory and practice, has created a lived present reality and a clear vision of the future outside of the disposability of neoliberal logic.

Early in the morning on January 1, 1994 - the same day that the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, came into effect, launching Mexico fully into the neoliberal system of integrated world capitalism - the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (The Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN) shot onto the scene of international politics when they cried "¡Ya basta!" ("Enough is enough!"). The cry was an explicit rejection of the reality of the indigenous people in Mexico where they were often relegated to the status of non-person, a type of living death, which included poverty, lack of education, hunger and death by treatable diseases. In this sense, they were considered (if considered at all) to be totally disposable, the unusable excess of neoliberal capitalism. In fact, the Zapatistas' war is not a war against the Mexican government, but against neoliberalism itself - a force which they claim has already thrown the world into a state of constant global war, a Fourth World War, fought by the agents of neoliberal globalization against the poor and working classes of the world.

The EZLN seized several towns in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, including the state's capital, San Cristóbal de las Casas. However, they quickly set themselves apart from the Marxist guerilla movements that had become common in Latin America throughout the 1970s and '80s by their refusal to take power, instead claiming that their aim was to create a space for democracy. January 1, 2014 marked 20 years since their initial uprising and 31 years since the first guerillas went into the jungle of southeastern Mexico to begin their insurgency. Since the inception of the movement, the *compañeras* and *compañeros* of the EZLN have undergone constant transformations: first abandoning their initial Leninist vanguardism as a result of their contact with the indigenous populations in the Lacandón and then, following their 1994 uprising, gradually dissolving its clandestine military structure into something that is far more fluid, inclusive and stable in its resistance. This movement became most explicit when they released their [Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle](#) and launched its corresponding "[Other Campaign](#)." More than ever, the Sixth Declaration and the Other Campaign internationalized their struggle and opened lines of communication and support with other groups

resisting neoliberalism.

Beyond the international support and their political agitation, the Zapatista resistance also has a very concrete, lived reality to it. After a series of failed attempts at negotiation with the Mexican government, the government's refusal to honor the [San Andrés Accords](#) and the continued threat of attack from military forces (the most notable being the [massacre in the village of Acetal](#)), the Zapatistas abandoned "the politics of demands," and with it all contact with the Mexican government and adopted a different tactic, to [live as though they had already won](#). On August 9, 2004, they established five autonomous municipalities, the *Caracoles*, each with its own [Junta de Buen Gobierno](#) (Junta of Good Government) that is responsible for its own Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Municipal Zone (MAREZ). Despite continued Mexican harassment and attacks from [local paramilitary groups](#) (many of which are supplied and supported by the Mexican military), they control a vast area of Chiapas. These autonomous zones are governed by the Zapatista mandate to lead by obeying, a system of direct democratic voting that has given rise to an environment where women's rights, LGBT and queer rights, child rights, education and health care flourish.

A key aspect of their longevity and success has been to move away from discourses that solely dwell on the past and to articulate a clear vision of a future where they are not subjected to the violence of disposability imposed by neoliberalism. In the Zapatistas' writings, particularly those credited to Subcomandante Marcos, "History" is nothing more than a discursive tool used in the service of oppression. History is used to narrativize the elite in terms such that their power and control seem natural, while at the same time, the history of the subaltern is diminished, if not fully erased ([Marcos, 2004, 242, 268](#)). The erasure of history carries with it the violence of non-recognition, of ostensibly reducing the subaltern person to the status of the subhuman, totally disposable. It ensures that subaltern consciousness does not exist outside of the limitations established by the elite, so that, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, their consciousness is always incomplete ([Spivak, 2006, 279](#)). Following from this understanding of history (or one could more aptly say historiography), Marcos once noted that the one and only aim to which the Zapatistas are working towards is to "open a crack in history" ([Marcos, 2004, 209](#)). This "crack in history" is the opening of a space within elite historiography that would disrupt their narrative of progression and arm subaltern people with the agency to reclaim their past and, by extension, their future.

The Zapatista vision of the future is not merely the promise of a future to come, but also - as we shall see somewhat paradoxically - articulated through the poetic stories of "[Old Antonio](#)" and "[Don Durito](#)." Old Antonio was a local Mayan villager who helped facilitate the first contact between the EZLN and the local populations in the Lacandón jungle. However, in the Zapatista narrations, he takes on a more mythic sage-like character - not unlike Nietzsche's [Zarathustra](#) - who lives outside time and space. His stories come to us as memories of the past and future beyond and outside of neoliberalism. "Don Durito de la Lacandon" is a fictionalized beetle and knight-errant fighting against neoliberalism. Don Durito's character sees neoliberalism as a thin veil that can be torn down to show the world outside of its violence. These writings transmit the Zapatista future back to us, but in a non-linear manner, as memories.

Reading memory into history gives the Zapatista narration of time a topological character. As opposed to the teleological history of succession, which sees history moving on a progressive vertical trajectory with each generation building on the previous towards a unified subject, the Zapatista memory of events (including those events yet to come) playfully casts moments of the past, present and future on a topological plane that is then folded over, so that points on the plane converge in a non-successive manner. To quote Tomas Nail, "Consider the way in which they have selected some moments from Mexican history (Emiliano Zapata's peasant uprising 1910-1917), some components from Marxist history (red stars, the use of the word 'comrade' and so on), some components from their own

indigenous history (consensus decision-making, autonomous village networks and so on) as well as some components of the future (the promise of a non-neoliberal future) to compose the historical hodgepodge of their own political event" ([Nail, 2012, 66-67](#)).

The sublimation of time with memory allows different moments in time to be put into proximity with each other so that they can create new modes of thinking and action, what Deleuze and Guattari called a "machinic assemblage." Following the work of Felix Guattari (especially his collaborations with Gilles Deleuze in the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* series), in its simplest terms, an assemblage is when two or more things that are in proximity to each other join together to form a new "machine." Proximity here is defined not by actual geographic space, but by proximity of desire. (Indeed, in the post-World Wide Web world, thinking in terms limited to geographic space has become increasingly irrelevant.) Desire is all-important. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire can be thought of as a constant flow that is heterogeneous to any one individual, but communally articulated. Subjectivity, for Deleuze and Guattari, is created only in the wake of desire. In the case of the Zapatistas, it is the desire for a world outside of neoliberal exploitation, in which life is not disposable. Or, as the Zapatistas are fond of saying, a world in which many worlds can fit.

For 10 years now, the Zapatistas have been living autonomously, creating a world not consumed by capitalism's manufactured desire. It would be naive to assume that there haven't been serious stumbling blocks to overcome, but nevertheless they have managed what many believe to be impossible, a life outside of capitalism's culture of disposability. They have refused to be relegated to an undignified living death as excess and created a new world based on dignity, autonomy and sovereignty. The Zapatistas haven't moved with the speed that many thinkers and activists would like, but that is perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from them. In the *First Declaration*, they note that they are the product of 500 years of anti-colonial resistance, and each communiqué since then has highlighted the continued need to resist exploitation and exclusion in all their forms. Only through continuous resistance can people realize the memory of a non-disposable future. The process of de-colonialization and resistance to dehumanizing forces is never-ending, so patience is by far the most important virtue. Or, as the Zapatista axiom states, "we walk slowly because we are going far."

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