

Bringing Each Other to Greatness: Narratives of the Revolutionary Vanguard and Horizontal
Alternatives in Zapatista Theory and Practice

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The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional or EZLN, more colloquially known as the Zapatistas, are a movement that defies convention. The ideology of the group incorporates diverse traditions of thought including Marxism and as well as the linguistic and cultural traditions of several indigenous communities. Originally the organization began as a faction of the Marxist militant cause known as the National Liberation Forces (FLN) who were formed with the objective of trying to foment a communist revolution against the Mexican national government. When this strategy proved unsuccessful in northern Mexico, several members of the group went to Chiapas and began organizing among and with indigenous peoples along there, eventually breaking entirely with the larger organization of the FLN. Rather than adopting a vanguardist approach in which a party of dedicated, educated Marxists lead the revolution, as the FLN did, zapatista ideology today emphasizes local autonomy and decentralized leadership, part of what has been identified as a wider movement of movement building in Latin America and internationally known as “horizontalism”. Education in zapatista practices today reflects their ideological shift, attempting a flat exchange of knowledge, with the organization learning from the people they are responsible to as much as they teach them.

The practice of Zapatista education, like the rest of their philosophy, is grounded in the context of Chiapas. As a movement that has become so associated with the indigenous peoples of that region, the local context of Chiapas is difficult to distinguish from the influence of these native groups on Zapatista ideology. The perspective Zapatista ideology has on learning is a result of several sources of thought interacting with one another, mainly that of a Marxist vanguard in the form of the EZLN cadre of north Mexican militants that came to Chiapas to organize the populace and the local, largely indigenous people of the region themselves. These diverse origins not only influenced the content of Zapatista theory but shaped its understanding

of what education means for the purposes of conveying revolutionary ideology and the source from which that ideology derives. The Zapatista transmission of theory challenges the traditional academic assumption of vanguardism as an inherent imposition and the essentialization of both indigenous and Marxist thought. Through their historical interaction both the indigenous peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatistas have influenced each other's concept of theory, creating a non-hierarchical understanding of learning.

In the paper that follows I outline the academic and international understandings of the Zapatistas and their place in this dichotomy between Marxist vanguardism and horizontalist alternatives, covering how these terms have been applied to the Zapatistas by those outside their movement. My analysis will then turn to the way the Zapatista conceptualize and articulate their own understanding of their relation to questions of autonomous governance, as well as the implications these opinions have for the larger Zapatista philosophy towards education. Through using Bakunin's description of scientific versus practical methods of understanding, I hope to demonstrate how Zapatista thought and practice defy traditional distinctions in political theory and academic scholarship that essentialize outside context as an inherent imposition to the local.

Much of the academic discussion surrounding the Zapatistas and education has focused on their practice in regards to schools within their own communities. Analysis in these papers often focuses on the commitment of zapatista education to indigenous values. In distinguishing the zapatista model of education from contemporary norm, there is a tendency to essentialize the "indigenous worldview" as in harmony with the world.¹ This perspective is contrasted against a modern, Western relationship to the world that is inherently in conflict with life, and to which

¹ Léa Marie Maison, *Beyond Western and Indigenous Perspectives on Sustainability: Politicizing Sustainability With the Zapatista Rebellious Education* (Journal of Transformative Education, 2023), 45

zapatista educational practice is situated in direct opposition to.² The practices of the zapatista autonomous schools, which emphasize the right for indigenous communities to decide curriculum, teach the history of Chiapas and communicate the demands and theory of the Zapatistas, are presented as an alternative or innovative model of development that could be replicated in other contexts.³

The focus in these papers on the importance of indigenous values to zapatista education is not inaccurate. The rhetoric of the Zapatistas themselves often situates education in relation to their larger struggle for autonomy. Both the First and Fourth Declarations of the Lacandon Jungle reference education as a critical right the people of Chiapas have historically been denied.⁴ Subcomandante Marcos, former spokesperson and figure for the Zapatista movement, has highlighted the poor rates of literacy and formal education in Chiapas in his other writings, mentioning how indigenous children have to labor instead of going to school in order to support their communities.⁵ Prior to the uprising in 94' or widespread organizing by the Zapatistas in Chiapas, there were existing movements in the region advocating for greater autonomy of indigenous peoples over their own education.⁶

The emphasis of zapatista education and other practices on inclusion of indigenous and other marginalized perspectives has regularly been associated with the notion of horizontalism. Based on the horizontalidad of the Argentine labor movement, horizontalism is a contemporary understanding of social movements whose solidarity and community building transgress lines of

² Ibid, 42-3.

³ Erandi Maldonado-Villalpando et al, *Grassroots Innovation for the Pluriverse: Evidence from Zapatismo and Autonomous Zapatista Education* (Sustainability Science, 2022), 1311.

⁴ Subcomandante Marcos, *Our Word is Our Weapon: Selected Writings* (Seven Stories Press, 2004), 13, 15, 79.

⁵ Ibid, 25

⁶ Leanne Reinke, *Globalisation and Local Indigenous Education in Mexico* (International Review of Education, 2004),491.

political or cultural identity that are traditionally viewed as difficult to bridge. Marina Sitrin defines the horizontalist philosophy as “a flat plane upon which to communicate” and a practice which “entails the use of direct democracy and strives toward creating non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian structures”.⁷ Since its conception in academic circles, horizontalism has been applied to alternative social movements outside the context of Argentina and a wider international struggle for popular sovereignty against capitalism and globalization, including to the struggle of the Zapatistas.⁸ Sitrin’s own activism as a member of the Occupy Movement has helped advance the image of the Zapatistas as part of a wider emergence of horizontalist movements.⁹ Despite figures like Marcos continually affirming the importance of international solidarity to his movement’s success, horizontalism is not a term that has entered zapatista propaganda, pointing to a divide between how the Zapatistas understand themselves and how they are perceived.¹⁰

There has been less written about the connection between Zapatistas and vanguardism. The narrative about the Zapatistas centers around the ways in which they are explicitly democratic and incorporate local context and community needs into their agenda. The Marxist conception of the revolutionary vanguard, that a dedicated cohort of educated ideologues are necessary to orchestrate the overthrow of the state, stands in stark contrast to everything the Zapatistas present themselves as. Work has been done to document the communist roots of the group as an offshoot of the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (the National Liberation Forces or FLN) but little has been written about the relationship of vanguard ideology to the philosophy of

⁷Marina Sitrin, *Ruptures in Imagination: Horizontalism, Autogestion and Affective Politics in Argentina* (Policy & Practice: Centre for Global Education, 2007), 46.

⁸ Ibid, 45, 47, 50.

⁹ Marina Sitrin, *Horizontalism: From Argentina to Wall Street* (NACLA Report on the Americas 2011).

¹⁰ Marcos, “Our Word”, 95-6.

neozapatismo. The topic is mainly raised in order to compare the strategy of guerilla focoism advanced by the FLN as unsuccessful with the direct campaign for building popular support employed by the EZLN.¹¹ Although as a group the Zapatistas position themselves in opposition to the idea of a revolutionary vanguard, Marcos himself has weighed in on the topic:

“We know that the Zapatistas don’t have a place in the (dis) agreement of the revolutionary and vanguard organizations of the world, or in the rearguard... We don’t grieve when we recognize that our ideas and proposals don’t have an eternal horizon, and that there are ideas and proposals better suited than ours... Our weapons are not used to impose ideas or ways of life, rather to defend a way of thinking and a way of seeing the world and relating to it, something that, even though it can learn a lot from other thoughts and ways of life, also has a lot to teach.”¹²

The difference between vanguard and “horizontalist” modes of thought towards education that Marcos describes here is an underexplored and critical aspect of zapatista theory and practice. The concept of horizontalism has only been tangentially applied to the zapatista relationship to knowledge, with even less said on how that is distinct from a vanguardist practice of education.¹³ Positioning their “way of thinking” as both learning and teaching rather than imposing ideas like vanguardism is a significant distinction and relevant for larger discussions surrounding the communication of theory as revolutionary pedagogical practice.

In order to understand how the relationship of the EZLN to education developed into what it is today, it is important to consider how the movement which came to be known as the

¹¹ Christopher Gunderson, *The Communist Roots of Zapatismo and the Zapatista Uprising* (Perspectives on Global Development and Technology, 2017), 175.

¹² ROARMAG.org, “Subcomandante Marcos: ‘I Shit On All the Revolutionary Vanguard of this Planet’”, archived May 10, 2014, at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140510190620>.

¹³ Maldonado-Villalpando et al, “Grassroots Innovation”, 1313.

Zapatistas formed. The beginnings of the Zapatistas as the FLN had a significant impact on the way the group initially approached and continues to view recruitment into their cause. The ideology of the organization the EZLN were descended from held that the strategy of foco, that a small contingent of guerillas could through their resistance instill a revolution against a capitalist state, was a viable approach in the Mexican context. Although the EZLN was an explicit attempt to achieve results through different means following a series of defeats at the hands of the Mexican state, accounts of this process can be interpreted as describing vanguardism. The elder responsible (organizer) Manuel described this process of incorporation into the movement as a vertical transfer of information from those already in the organization to prospective recruits:

“... and the compa arrived and asked me how I felt and how I see it and how we are doing right now in this situation. Well, I started asking questions. We didn’t really know how we were doing. Then he started telling me that we work to grow and harvest our products, we don’t control the price... then he told that I could begin to recruit compas, and there I began thinking about how to go about recruiting the compas”.¹⁴

This description could give the impression of zapatista education as a process by which a vanguard conveys the necessary revolutionary ideology to the masses. The compa “tells” Manuel and the other prospects about the circumstances of their exploitation, and specifically how the value of what they produce is determined without their input. Then, at the direction of the compas, they are encouraged to spread these ideas in their community and among others. Importantly though, the compa begins by asking questions to Manuel about “how I felt and how I see it and how we are doing right now in this situation.” The explanation the compa provides is prompted after Manuel “started asking questions”, implying that this particular exchange was not

¹⁴ Dylan Eldredge Fitzwater, *Autonomy Is in Our Hearts : Zapatista Autonomous Government through the Lens of the Tsotsil Language* (2019), 37.

merely a case of the compa lecturing at them. This is only one experience with the zapatista process of awakening political consciousness, but what is portrayed here contains both elements of a vanguard communicating ideals but also of the masses themselves as conscious political actors with agency in the process. The more important implication is that the Zapatistas choose to highlight this account in their propaganda, reflecting the sense that they see it as aligning with their horizontalist values.

The centering of either a Marxist vanguard or a subsuming indigenous context obscures the way in which both these perspectives have taught the other. Through contact with the people and environment of Chiapas, the worldview of the zapatistas changed. There is a discernible difference in the statues of the FLN and those of the EZLN published alongside their declaration of war against the Mexican government in 1994. The self-stated goals of the FLN after victory against the Mexican state are one, “to install a socialist system... through social ownership of the means of production”, two, establish “a worker’s state, which will attend to the interests of the majority of the population, and in which work will be obligatory”, and three, “form a single political party based on the principles of Marxist-Leninism”.¹⁵ These objectives lay out a vision for the revolutionary state in which power is vertical and expressed in complete alignment with the interests of the working class. Although the state acts with the popular will, the conception of that will is entirely uniform. “The interest of the majority” are ensured through the “social ownership of the means of production” but the people themselves are not acknowledged by these principles as a knowledgeable perspective with authority outside of the state.

The stated principles of the Zapatistas in contrast explicitly place knowledge in the hands of the people. In the Revolutionary Laws, the masses are afforded the right to choose “their own authorities in whatever way they consider to be best and to demand that they are respected” and

¹⁵ Ibid, 18-9.

insist “that the revolutionary armed forces not intervene in matters of civilian authority or in the expropriation of agricultural, commercial, financial and industrial capital”.¹⁶ These tenets assert the validity of the populace as an authoritative perspective over that of the Zapatistas themselves. The people not only have the symbolic right to decide on a leader, they may do so “in whatever way they consider to be best”, independent of the EZLN. The inclusion of the right to demand the revolutionary vanguard not interfere in civilian governance or seize the means of production is notable given the ideological significance of collectivization for Marxism. The Laws allow the people to defend their property and land against the revolutionary army with force if necessary.¹⁷ This demonstrates a willingness to compromise on the first principles that were central to the self-conception of the FLN.

The understanding of vanguardism as a political practice that is inconsiderate to local context is called into question in how zapatista education informs feminist practice among indigenous communities. Under the FLN, feminist practice meant women could join the struggle against the Mexican government as equal partners.¹⁸ The revolution itself was the means through which women’s liberation would occur, with no conception of patriarchy as a distinct form of oppression separate from the capitalist state. The earlier vanguardist practices of the EZLN reflected this legacy, with the majority of the responsables at first being men even while women were not excluded from participating in organizing.¹⁹ EZLN philosophy conceptualized patriarchal oppression as a historical precedent in society that can be defeated through the participation of women in the broader zapatista project.²⁰ This narrative is amplified by the official statements and publications of the Zapatistas which present the growth of political

¹⁶ Ibid, 20-1.

¹⁷ Ibid, 26.

¹⁸ Hilary Klein, “Compañeras : Zapatista Women’s Stories” (Seven Stories Press, 2015), 144.

¹⁹ Ibid, 139.

²⁰ Ibid, 144.

consciousness among women as a process of inclusive practice. Marcos contributes to this process through his retelling of the vote ratifying the Revolutionary Women's Law:

“You could hear rumors and comments. In Chol, Tzetzal, Tojolabal, Mam, Zoque, and “Castillian”... Susana, undistributed, kept charging forward against everything and everyone. ‘We don’t want to be forced into marriage with someone we don’t want. We want to have the number of children we want and can care for. We want to hold positions of authority in the community. We want the right to speak up and for our opinions to be respected’... The men looked at each other, nervous, restless... women authorities began to applaud and talk among themselves. Needless to say, the Women’s Laws were approved unanimously. One of the Tzeltal men commented ‘the good thing is that my wife doesn’t understand Spanish, because otherwise...’ A Tsostil women insurgent... interrupted him: “You’re screwed, because we’re going to translate it into all of the languages.” The companero lowered his eyes.²¹

While at first this excerpt seems to support the narrative of liberation through participation, there is a distinct feminist vanguard practice on display. Like in the account of Manuel, Marcos and the zapatistas have deliberately chosen to highlight this exchange in their outward presentation. Women are making their voices heard through the presentation and discussion of their own beliefs, with Susana “undisturbed” by the discomfort and chiding notes from the men present. The most critical aspect in this exchange though is the reaction of the women collectively after the translation as not only equal participants in the process but an assertive force in the conversion. Their “[applause] and talk among themselves” is not in isolation but in the context of the atmosphere of the room moments before, an explicit affirmation of their stance in the face of the *compañeros* and their cross-cultural restlessness

²¹ Fitzwater, “Autonomy Is in Our Hearts”, 23-4.

expressed in both Spanish and indigenous languages. When one of the *compañeros* tries to joke about the inability of his wife to understand the implications of the Laws because she does not speak Spanish, he is immediately called out for his comment by a *compañera* and expected to account for what in that moment has become a counterrevolutionary statement.

The actions of the *compañeras* are not only an example of participatory democratic practice, but a declaration of the value that the perspective of women has in the wider Zapatista movement through vanguardist action. Women in Chiapas have historically not participated in the practice of local assemblies that the contemporary system of Zapatista autonomous governance is based on.²² Because of this historical deficit in women's participation, female organizers have needed specifically to encourage and facilitate the involvement of their fellow women in the political process.²³ To move past liberation as simply equal participation, women have actively advocated for themselves and advanced an explicitly feminist agenda in the practice of their communities. Driving these initiatives has been the indigenous women themselves wanting to improve their communities. The patriarchal discomfort of both indigenous and Mexican men during the ratification reveals though that this process is not intrinsic to the indigenous identity of these women, but a result of their communities interactions with the EZLN. These ideas of participation, autonomy, and collective action have been reinterpreted by women in their own terms and directed in a vanguardist fashion back at the organization of the Zapatistas, going further than the limited concept of women's liberation as achieved through fixed participation to an active and continually combating of patriarchy.

Bakunin argues in *Statism and Anarchy* that approaching revolutionary theory abstractly leads to logics that oppress the very people those thoughts are ostensibly intended to protect. The

²² Klein, "Compañeras", 141.

²³ *Ibid*, 143.

scientific perspective used by theorists, Bakunin says, creates an “ideal social organization” that is treated by its adherents as being relevant and applicable to all communities.²⁴ This devotion to a single, objective ideological framework not only places science above the rest of the human experience but also devalues the potential for popular frameworks to develop from practice.

The lived reality of the people, Bakunin contends, is capable of producing far more revolutionary potential than abstract thought can muster. Scientific thought is the antithesis of popular or universal knowledge, with only a fraction of individuals in society possessing the appropriate expertise to understand theory on its own terms.²⁵ The lived reality of the masses on the other hand is open to all because all of us, regardless of class or knowledge, engage with the world through our observations and labor. These “historically evolved instincts”, as Bakunin refers to them, are innate to the human experience and derive directly from how we live our lives, as opposed to abstract theory which reverses the equation and attempts to apply conscious thoughts onto lived reality.²⁶ Rather than theorists imposing their “ideal” understanding of the world on the community, the practice of its members in that community will determine their understanding.²⁷ Rooting this democratized understanding of theory in education removes the authority of knowledge over labor. The two separate concepts are then able to return to their natural state as equal elements of human experience.²⁸

Bakunin himself though is indebted to a scientific concept of theory and practice as essential dimensions, without the nuance to see how movements can interpret and repurpose theory for their own ends. Placing the legitimacy of thought on lived experience necessarily implies that a purely analytical approach is insufficient to understand the world. A universal

²⁴ Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 133

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Michael Bakunin, *The Basic Bakunin: Writings 1869-1871* (Prometheus Books, 1992), 116.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

interpretation of Marxism would lean towards prescribing what actions revolutionaries should take rather than framing its understanding of politics as deriving from the beliefs of a specific group of people within a specific context. Attached to that stance is an implicit perspective on education as those with knowledge imparting that information to those without it. The Zapatistas defy not only this traditional understanding of where theory originates, but the essentialization of Marxist theory as necessarily an external imposition onto the lived reality of practice. Chiapas and the indigenous people there have a tradition of resistance, and resistance alongside outsider actors and of local communist parties forming out of opposition to large plantation owners in the region, complicating the narrative that the perspective and knowledge of indigenous people in Chiapas is wholly different from the Marxist perspective of the original zapatista guerrillas.²⁹

The tension Bakunin is trying to resolve in socialist theory is that the discipline itself is an explanation of the exploitation of the industrial working class (very real, material conditions) conveyed through a theoretical text (abstraction of the material into thought). Theory and experience are presented alongside one another rather than as separate fields for the Zapatistas. Their method is to blend the thought of the movement with the world as it is experienced by the people so that their conception of their own development is experienced, not just read. Dylan Fitzwater—a participant in the Zapatista *escuelitas* or “little schools” where those outside the community can come and learn about their project through studying the various indigenous languages of Chiapas, the history of the region, and how those influences are reflected in their practice—describes this process of two fields transformed into one as taking place on the very literal fields of Chiapas farms. During the *escuelita*, as much of his time in the small Tzeltal community of Nueva Esperanza was spent performing the farming that the people there do daily

²⁹ Gunderson, “Communist Roots of Zapatismo”, 172.

as it was studying his assigned readings from the Zapatistas.³⁰ Grounding their theory in the practice of the community informs not only the education of the students of the *escuelita* but the theory of the movement itself. The community and its inhabitants represent sources of knowledge just as, if not more, legitimate than the produced texts that describe their struggle. The theory of the Zapatistas can not be understood without learning the context from the people themselves.

The importance of grounding theory within context is critical to understanding why the zapatistas emphasize the relevance of history to learning to the extent that they do. In the second grade of the *escuelita*, students learn about the history of the movement and the trajectory of its development over time. The question this poses, “what was our way of organizing ourselves” as Fitzwater puts it, explicitly calls attention to the ways in which their organization has transformed and learned itself.³¹ The Zapatistas understand the tensions inherent in the premise of their movement. Rather than pretend the different strains of thought they come from are one in the same, the movement embraces what has emerged from that tension.

The perspective of indigenous peoples in Chiapas has not remained static through this construction of political consciousness in the region, incorporating elements of zapatista thought into existing local understandings. The focus of Fitzwater’s research concerns how the Tsotsil language interprets the political notions the Zapatistas espouse and recontextualizes them in the local context. “Ich’el ta mu’k” for example, which translates as “to carry oneself to greatness”, denotes an expansive respect for both the human and natural worlds. Zapatista philosophy understands this respect as a force in contrast to the capitalism, a stance reflected in the modified “Ichbail ta muk”, which interprets this respect as a concerted effort advanced by the

³⁰ Fitzwater, “Autonomy Is in Our Hearts”, 6-7.

³¹ Ibid, 14.

community, “to bring (ichil) one another (ba) to largeness or greatness (muk)”.³² The fact that ichbail ta muk can be translated as “democracy”, like Fitzwater says, illustrates neither an inherent linguistic conception of democracy that Tsotil possesses or Marxist influence, but the reimagining of both terms through the translation of these concepts to different contexts.³³ Using Tsotil conceptions to describe these fundamental notions of socialist thought expands rather than limits their meanings.

Refusing to recognize the reciprocal character the zapatista perspective on learning possesses limits the scope of its implications. A flat understanding of the horizontalist framework views multifaceted philosophies like that of the Zapatistas as incorporating other perspectives. This reading reinforces the view of the EZLN and the formal leadership of the Zapatistas like Subcomandante Marcos as the impetus behind the movement for deciding to bridge the gap between themselves and the indigenous people of Chiapas when in fact it is just as much product of those people choosing themselves to bridge that distance. Through interfacing with the Zapatista organizers and their efforts to build political consciousness among the people, those people developed their own understanding of the Marxist critiques that were imparted to them. Those understanding were based in their specific context and articulated in their local languages, but formulated as a modern philosophy meant to address the modern (though historically contingent) issues in their lives such as land rights. The revolutionary advocacy of the compañeras demonstrates how theory is not only within the possession of the one who communicates. Taking the revolutionary ideals of autonomy zapatista organizing emphasized, the women within the indigenous communities arrived at a position far more radical than the stance of the movement they were involved in, ultimately pushing it forward through their

³² Fitzwater, “Autonomy Is in Our Hearts”, 9, 36.

³³ Ibid, 36.

relentless agitation. As academics and outside observers of the Zapatista project, looking at their thought and practice for our own studies and struggles, it is crucial that we not reduce the ability for individuals and communities to interpret theory and use them for their own purposes. The horizons of zapatista thought stretch farther than even its leadership, participants, and specters realize, dreaming of futures beyond the rigid notions and borders we contain our thoughts within.

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