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Note / Nota

Adiós Marcos: A Fond Farewell to the Subcommander Who Simply Ceased to Exist

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At 2:08 a.m. on May 25, 2014, Zapatista military leader and spokesperson, Subcommander Marcos, declared that he had ceased to exist.¹ Regardless of whether it signals, as some have suggested, a stepping down of the Subcommander,² or merely represents the latest

¹ The Subcommander's full statement can be found at: (in Spanish) <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2014/05/25/entre-la-luz-y-l-a-sombra/>; and (in English) <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2014/05/27/between-light-and-shadow/>. For audio-visual coverage of the declaration see: <http://radiozapatista.org/?p=9766&lang=en>.

² See, for example, the BBC's piece entitled "Mexico's Zapatista rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos steps down", (May 26, 2014); posted on the Internet at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-27569695>. Although the BBC report does not provide it, there exists (contextual) evidence to support such an interpretation: the previous year, on February 14, Marcos had introduced to the world a new Subcommander, Moisés. This was a highly significant promotion (from Lieutenant Colonel) since it

transformation of a man who was born Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente and subsequently underwent numerous incarnations,³ Marcos' May 25th declaration, in which he looks back on and assesses his role in the Zapatista movement over the last two decades of its public life, affords an ideal opportunity to take stock of the Subcommander's impact and achievements.

Let us begin by briefly examining the text of the Subcommander's statement. In the section in which he discusses the figure of Marcos, the Subcommander begins by explaining, not without some self-deprecation, how and why the character Marcos arose:

In the earliest hours of the morning on the first day of the first month of the year 1994, an army of giants, that is to say, of indigenous rebels, descended on the cities to shake the world with its step. Only a few days later, with the blood of our fallen soldiers still fresh on the city streets, we noticed that those from outside did not see us. Accustomed to looking down on the indigenous from above, they didn't lift their gaze to look at us. Accustomed to seeing us humiliated, their heart did not understand our dignified rebellion. Their gaze had stopped on the only *mestizo* they saw with a ski mask, that is, they didn't see. Our authorities, our commanders, then said to us: "They can only see those who are as small as they are. Let's make someone as small as they are, so that they can see him and through him, they can see us". And so began a complex manoeuvre of distraction, a terrible and marvellous magic trick, a malicious

represents the first appointment of a Zapatista Subcomandante in a quarter-of-a-century; it was also the first time the Zapatistas had had more than one Subcommander (i.e. Marcos) since the death of Subcomandante Pedro on the first day of their uprising on January 1, 1994.

³ See Nick Henck, *Subcommander Marcos: the man and the mask* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), for the passage of Rafael Guillén through Zacarías and then Marcos (his guerrilla *noms-de-guerre*) to his re-baptism as Delegado Zero at the outset of the "Other Campaign." See Alejandro Reyes, "Adiós, Subcomandante", *Radio Zapatista* (May 26, 2014), posted on the Internet at <http://radiozapatista.org/?p=9785&lang=en>, for a detailed, first-hand account of what appears to be Marcos' transformation into Subcomandante Galeano at the end of his May 25, 2014 declaration.

move from the indigenous heart that we are...And so began the construction of the character named “Marcos”...⁴

In the remaining sections of the piece Marcos then repeatedly refers to himself as a “mascot costume” (*una botarga*) and a “hologram” (*holograma*)—both four times—and notes his passage “from being a spokesperson (*un vocero*) to being a distraction (*un distractor*).” Marcos appears particularly insistent on referring to his persona as being that of a “mascot costume”, stating: “If I had to define Marcos the character, I would say without a doubt that he was a mascot costume...”⁵ Such a self-portrait, however, is one which I would reject, as Manuel Camacho Solís, who was appointed commissioner for Dialogue and Reconciliation in Chiapas by President Salinas, rushed to do the following day, declaring: “It is clear to me that Marcos was not a mascot costume. As I understand it, a mascot costume is a figure that is inflated and deflated as is convenient. I believe that Marcos was a politician of major significance in the country in recent years, a revolutionary leader.”⁶

Finally, the Subcommander muses:

They may later say that this thing with the character [of Marcos] was pointless. But an honest look back at those days will show how many people turned to look at us, with pleasure or

⁴ This translation is that of Enlace Zapatista, as are the subsequent quotations from the Subcommander’s announcement, although in places I have suggested an alternative translation for certain words or phrases (see below, n. 5).

⁵ The Enlace Zapatista website translates “una botarga” as “a colorful ruse” (three times), a “ruse” (once), and an “outfit” (once). However, I have preferred to render it “mascot costume”, which is more accurate in terms of common understanding and the meaning intended in Marcos’ announcement (as is evident from the Subcommander’s 6th postscript: “O sea que como quien dice, sin la botarga, ¿ya puedo andar desnudo?”)

⁶ Acelia Maya, “El Subcomandante no fue una botarga”, 26/05/2014 11:48:40 p.m.; posted on the Internet at: <http://www.am.com.mx/notareforma/42506>, my translation.

displeasure, because of the distorted features (desfiguros) of a mascot costume (una botarga)...⁷

Certainly there is a degree of truth to this self-assessment; however, its bald brevity and understatement leads to an obscuring of the vital importance of this attracting of attention. It was interviews with the eloquent Subcommander, and a series of erudite explanatory communiqués issued by him, which grabbed the attention of the media, and by turns Mexican civil society and an international audience. In the short run, this prevented the Mexican government from trying to eradicate the Zapatista “problem” using the overwhelming military might at its disposal: it was predominantly thanks to the Subcommander that the Zapatista movement survived its first year in the open—had the Zapatistas been robbed of Subcommander Marcos on the first day of the uprising, as they were of Subcommander Pedro, the now two-decades’ long story of the Zapatista movement would almost certainly have been cut short. Moreover, in subsequent weeks, months and years, it would be the figure of the Subcommander who sustained the movement’s presence in the Mexican and global press. Indeed, his communiqués, speeches and interviews have drawn Hollywood stars, literati, intellectuals, artists, academics, journalists, rock musicians and countless citizens from all over the world not just to the Zapatista banner, but to Chiapas itself—to meet the iconic Subcommander and, more significantly in the long run, to see for themselves both the appalling conditions in which indigenous Chiapans have to live and the innovative and resourceful ways they organize to overcome these deprivations. Put briefly, his various *coups de théâtre* not only secured attention for the movement but also helped it forge links and build solidarity with individuals, groups and organizations worldwide.

How curious it is then, that a tendency to understate Marcos’ role has arisen and still, to some extent, persists. For, as Glen David Kuecker (2009, 176) observes, when it comes to treatment of the

⁷ The Enlace Zapatista website translates “los desfiguros de una botarga” as “the disguises of a colorful ruse.”

Zapatista movement, “The literature downplays Marcos—often he is not even mentioned—and opts for telling the story of communities in resistance with special focus on the novelty and innovation of resistance...” This tendency, one especially pronounced among academics I would argue, has as its cause an admirable intention on the part of scholars; namely, as predominantly (relatively) privileged northern, non-indigenous academics avoid concentrating on a single non-indigenous, intellectual Subcommander at the expense of the thousands of barely literate indigenous peasants who comprise the Zapatista movement, and by doing so to provide a counter balance to the stance taken by the majority of the mass media which has tended to do precisely that. Regrettably, however, this minimization of Marcos has resulted in the obscuring of an admirable, inspirational and influential rebel icon and his achievements.

While in no way wishing to reduce the entire Zapatista movement to the Subcommander, attributing to him all its successes, in my opinion Marcos should be given his due credit, if not for his sake, then at least so that an inaccurate and misleading portrayal of events (and human nature) is not promoted. For, although Marcos has lamented the fact that the press ignores the voices of Chiapas’ indigenous people, instead only paying attention to their plight when this is voiced by himself, a white *mestizo*,⁸ it is undeniable that

⁸ See Marcos’ communiqué “Putting Out the Fire with Gasoline (postscript to the cartoon)” dated January 11, 2013, and posted on the Internet at: <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2013/01/16/putting-out-the-fire-with-gasoline-postscript-to-the-cartoon/>. Marcos writes in a postscript:

P.S. THAT GIVES LESSONS ON RACISM IN COMMUNICATION—I read in various places “EZLN yes, Marcos, no” and that they want to hear the indigenous Zapatistas, not the egomaniacal Sup. Okay, here goes... For example, the August 15, 2012 denunciation of the Junta de Buen Gobierno of La Realidad was the principal article on the Zapatista web page for 24 straight days and got 1080 visitors/readers... Number of journalists that “wrote up” the denunciation: one. Number of comments about it in writings by intellectuals, zero... Number of visits to the Sup’s

thousands worldwide have been attracted to the Zapatistas' cause by their charismatic spokesperson, and not the indigenous *comandancia* that directs the movement. (Just because such a truth is unpalatable—perhaps even a serious and telling indictment on human nature—does not make it any less true: people have been, and may very well always be, motivated by charismatic iconic figures. We may wish it were otherwise, but to pretend that it is so risks obscuring our understanding of human nature, history and contemporary events.) Moreover, Marcos' espousal of left-wing and anti-globalization views has widened the appeal of the Zapatistas, resulting in people such as the present author, who came more from an anti-capitalist background and was previously ignorant of indigenous peoples, becoming interested in the movement.

Thus, when Marcos writes in his farewell to the world that, "It is our conviction and our practice that in order to rebel and to struggle, neither leaders nor bosses nor messiahs nor saviours are necessary. To struggle, one only needs a sense of shame, a bit of dignity, and a lot of organization. As for the rest, it either serves the collective or it doesn't..." he may be right, but a charismatic spokesperson who can act as a translator and interface with the outside world, and who can inspire others to struggle and rebel, can prove extremely useful. (Thus, although South Africa's ANC was more than just Nelson Mandela and Burma's NDM is more than just Aung San Suu Kyi, there is no denying the vital role played by these icons in galvanizing popular support around the world for their respective movements.) Indeed, Alma Guillermoprieto (2002, 216), writing just over a year into the Zapatista rebellion, goes so far as to suggest that there "was a very real sense in which, during the past thirteen months, *Marcos* fought the Zapatista war single-handed", adding it "was, after all, a public relations war, and the Indian fighters...were not equipped for the sophisticated exchanges with the government and the Mexican public that such a war required". The very least we can say then is that without Marcos as its

cartoon that so offended the enlightened ones: more than five thousand visits in less than 48 hours...

spokesperson, the Zapatista movement would never have made such a dramatic impact on the national and international stage.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that this is all the Subcommander is: a chic guerrilla celebrity possessed of a romantic hue common to revolutionaries, but elevated by an uncommon personal *élan*, who waged a masterful public relations campaign. Rather, this is the least of his achievements; his significance lies primarily, I would argue, in his function as an interface or conduit between two entirely estranged entities: Mexico's rural indigenous peoples and urban *mestizo* society. It was largely through Marcos' efforts, both literary and organizational, that these two Mexicos came to become aware of one another, to engage and interact, and, to some extent, understand each other. At the very basic level, this resulted in Mexico's indigenous peoples being, for the first time, extricated from the margins of society and brought center stage. This would have tremendous ramifications, as Carlos Monsiváis observed:

Since the 1994 Chiapas revolt of the Zapatistas...more books on the Indian question have been published than in the rest of the century. It's incredible that for the first time in Mexican history we have begun to problematize racism, the misery and inequality with respect to Indian rights.⁹

At the concrete level, it led to indigenous rights being addressed by politicians, entering policy discussions and even becoming legislation. Perhaps of more importance, however, was the psychological impact created by this meeting of two worlds. At a basic level, Marcos called out Mexican society for its blatant racism, thereby provoking much soul searching throughout Mexico's *mestizo* society: Octavio Paz claimed (1994, 109) that "we are all responsible because we have permitted, in Chiapas and in other regions of Mexico, the perpetuation of the misery of the peasants and, in particular, of the indigenous communities," while Carlos Monsiváis noted

⁹ In David Thelen, "Mexico's Cultural Landscapes: A Conversation with Carlos Monsiváis", *The Journal of American History* (86, 2, 1999): 613-622 (on 613).

how “Mexican racism has been exposed for the first time at a national level.”¹⁰ Writing 17 years after the Zapatista uprising erupted, Enrique Krauze (2011, 448) concluded that: “Mexico is different today...more sensitive to the condition of the Indians. That newfound sensitivity is due, in large measure, to the...flamboyant passage (and performance) of Subcomandante Marcos across the stage of history.”

The Subcommander savaged the government in particular for its callous and calculating policy toward the indigenous, whereby it utilized Mexico’s Indians as a tourist attraction while condemning them to live in a state of abject neglect. As Marcos (1995, 58) told one interviewer:

The government...wants to show the tourists the lovely Mexican culture...the folkloric dancing, the beautiful clothing and crafts of the indigenous people. But behind this picture is the real Mexico, the Mexico of the millions of Indians who live in extreme poverty. We have helped peel off the mask to reveal the real Mexico.

Finally, he rewrote Mexico’s indigenous peoples into the nation’s history, their having been excluded by “official history.” As Marcos told Julio Scherer García (2001, 13): “Mexico has had almost 200 years as an independent nation, and at every point in time the indigenous have appeared as the fundamental part, but at no time has any such thing been recognized.”

In this sense, Marcos can be said to belong to that post-68 generation of authors who counted among their ranks José Emilio Pacheco, Elena Poniatowska, and Carlos Monsiváis, and who, according to Victoria E. Campos (2001, 57), “sought to make political elites responsible for the effect of their policies and their indifference” by “mak[ing] the repressed, subterranean Mexico discernible in Mexican life...documenting traces of the absent and elucidating the very process of erasure...to recover figures exiled from other pages in others’ histories of the Mexican past.” More generally, such undertakings and

¹⁰ Idem.

emphases on the part of Marcos also position him as the latest in a long line of *pensadores*, defined by Sheldon B. Liss (1984, 8) as

...thinkers who try to interpret social reality...socialist humanists for whom improving the human condition is the primary objective...[who]...represent diverse versions of the ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ approaches to Marxist analysis...[and who]...tend to think of themselves as intellectuals with an obligation to use their critical faculties to challenge authority and established institutions, to delegitimize conventional wisdom, to search for solutions to social problems, and to provide leadership in the realm of thought.

It was not only the government’s policy toward Mexico’s indigenous that the Subcommander delivered a devastating critique of however; he also successfully demolished its claims concerning the results of its policy of neoliberal economic reform. As Marcos outlined in one interview:

...Salinas de Gortari’s strategy within neoliberalism was to construct a publicity campaign, presenting abroad a stable country, a good product that he was selling...we managed to affect that publicity campaign...to...demonstrate what was really happening, what this political, economic project meant for this country, for a part of the country, for the indigenous.

He continued:

Society is beginning to march in one direction and the State, the political system, in another...one is talking about two Mexicos: the virtual one of the political class with its great economic successes, the 7.5% Gross National Product growth and that of the rest of society which does not see economic growth anywhere.¹¹

Indeed, after the financial debacle of late 1995, the Subcommander (2005, 54) would proclaim: “Neoliberalism is not a theory to confront or explain the crisis. It is the crisis itself made theory

¹¹ In Yvon Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés Editores, 1997), 212 & 298 respectively.

and economic doctrine!” In this way, as Daniela di Piramo (2011, 183) has observed, “Marcos uses irony in his discourse both in terms of content and linguistic practice to expose the dominant neo-liberal order as irrational.”

Even more damaging to the government than Marcos’ attacks on its indigenous and neoliberal policies, however, was his demolition of a number of its ideological underpinnings. Chiefly, the Subcommander, through his re-appropriation of the figure of Zapata in the service of the Zapatista movement, wrested from the government its long-held, monopolistic grip on being the authentic, and therefore legitimate, exclusive heir to the Mexican Revolution. As Marcos explained to Yvon Le Bot (1997, 347-348):

When the EZLN...appeared, it had to fight the Mexican State for certain symbols of the nation’s history. The terrain of symbols is an occupied terrain, above all as regards Mexican history... In this case, that of historic symbols, the Mexican State uses them in a way which must be fought over. Zapata, for example.

So successful was the Subcommander in this regard that the government withdrew Zapata’s image from the 10 peso note and President Salinas changed the backdrop of his televised statements from a hanging portrait of Zapata to one of Carranza. As a result, George A. Collier and Elizabeth L. Quaratiello (1999 [1994], 158) point out: “These days, no one thinks of Zapata without thinking of Chiapas and Mexico’s new indigenous movement...the ruling party has lost virtually any credible claim to Emiliano Zapata as one of its heroes”.

Another ideological underpinning which the Subcommander successfully undermined was that of *mestizaje*. As José Rabasa (1997, 411) explains:

The state-sponsored ideology of *mestizaje* after the 1910 Revolution theoretically should have extended bonds of solidarity with Indians, but its historical effect was to promote a systematic denial of Indian roots—though the pre-Columbian past was idealized—and a program of acculturation that aimed to destroy indigenous languages and cultures. Only “mestizos” were deemed by the state to be authentic Mexicans.

Marcos basically exploded the myth of *mestizaje*, laying bare to *mestizo* Mexico, through his eloquence and satirical wit, its inherently racist nature and discriminatory function.

So too, other ideologies employed by the government to lend itself legitimacy came under savage attack by the Subcommander. Modernization, and more specifically Mexico's entry into modernity, was a substantial pillar of *salinismo*, President Salinas' (1988-1994) neo-liberal ideology. In an interview dated June 8, 1995, Carlos Monsiváis looked back over the preceding years, stating: "It was an incredible time. Rational, intelligent people were really in love with Salinas's ideas and Salinas's attitude... Salinas was the image of modernity...it was utter rubbish!"¹² In a later interview Monsiváis recalled how "Before the rebellion in Chiapas, the key word in Mexico was 'modernization,' the illusion of the First World around the corner... 'Modernization' took the place of nationalism, the old-time 'act' that united all sectors through festivity, mythology".¹³ Marcos immediately set about puncturing this myth of modernity, the myth of Mexico as a democratic, first-world nation and a beneficiary of neoliberalism: interviewed on the 1st day of the uprising, the Subcommander declared that "...the indigenous ethnicities of Mexico...are perfectly dispensable in the modernization program of Salinas de Gortari".¹⁴ Subsequently, he would recall how "thousands of indigenous armed with truth and fire, with shame and dignity, shook the country awake from its sweet dream of modernity", and talked of "the crime that, disguised as modernity, distributes misery on a global scale".¹⁵ The Subcommander's most

¹² In Claire Brewster, *Responding to Crisis in Contemporary Mexico: The Political Writings of Paz, Fuentes, Monsiváis, and Poniatowska* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2005), 150.

¹³ In Thelen, "Mexico's Cultural Landscapes", 613-14.

¹⁴ In Tom Hayden, *The Zapatista Reader* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002), 216.

¹⁵ In, respectively, Žiga Vodovnik, *iYa Basta! Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004), 61, and Subcommander Marcos, *Conversations with Durito: Stories of*

eloquent statement on the subject, and the one which perhaps has elicited the most resonance, came, however, in a communiqué written January 20, 1994:

...by taking off its own mask, Mexican civil society will realize, with a stronger impact, that the image that it has sold itself is a forgery, and that reality is far more terrifying than it thought. Each of us will show our faces, but the big difference will be that the “Sup Marcos” has always known what his real face looked like, and civil society will just wake up from a long and tired sleep that “modernity” has imposed at the cost of everything and everyone.¹⁶

Thus modernity, like *mestizaje* and the image of Zapata, became an ideological battleground contested by the government on the one hand, and Marcos on the other, through their respective discourses.¹⁷ The result, as George A. Collier and Elizabeth L. Quaratiello (1999 [1994], 155) observe, was as follows:

At the time of the Zapatista rebellion, Mexico was synonymous with “economic modernization”... At least for a time, the Zapatistas successfully deflected attention away from those who were pursuing modernization at any cost, and they forced a change in the public discourse over Mexico’s future... During 1994, the Zapatista rebellion seemed to stop the steamroller of Salinas de Gortari’s modernizing project in its tracks.

The final ideological lynchpin of the state attacked by the Subcommander was the rule of law, which the government frequently

the Zapatistas and Neoliberalism (New York: Autonomedia, 2005), 119.

¹⁶ In Autonomedia, *iZapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994), 116. See too Marcos’ blistering attack on Mexican modernity in his communiqué entitled “Above and below: masks and silences,” dated July 1998 in Žiga Vodovnik, *iYa Basta!*, 319-341, esp. 321ff.

¹⁷ Josh Bahn, “Marxism in a snail shell: Making history in Chiapas”, *Rethinking History* (13, 4, December 2009): 541-560, at 541 & 552, goes even further, arguing that the Zapatistas’ discourse challenged the very concept of modernity.

claimed to be upholding in an unconvincing attempt to maintain legitimacy. Marcos exposed how the government had donned a “rule-of-law mask” in order to disguise its practice of persecuting the poor while protecting the rich:¹⁸

Lacking the legitimacy which can only be obtained by the governed, these characters from the Mexican tragedy at the end of the century, supplant it with a mask made “ex profeso”, that of the Rule of Law (Estado de Derecho)¹⁹. In the name of the “Rule of Law” they impose economic measures, they assassinate, they imprison, they rape, they destroy, they persecute, they make war...

On top of this...nightmare cocktail, in addition to their poverty, millions of Mexicans will now have to take responsibility for the rescue of those other criminals, the bankers, who use the “Rule of Law” as an alibi, and who have an ever-willing accomplice and procurer in the Government.

In a speech at the inauguration of the forum for the reform of the state (July 1, 1996), Marcos went even further, stating: “That which kills a person is homicidal. That which kills many [people] is genocidal. What should one call that which kills a nation? The Mexican political system calls it ‘the rule of law.’”²⁰

Since in Mexico the state’s legitimacy rested on its being the sole and rightful heir to Mexican Revolution, a guarantor of Rule of Law, a provider of social welfare, and an upholder of democracy, Marcos’ challenging of the state’s record on all these fronts provided a powerful critique of the official discourse. However, the Subcommander did not limit himself to challenging the state on its performance, or even its legitimacy, he even provoked a rethinking of it conceptually. As Montesano Montessori (2009, 209 & 210) notes, whereas Salinas’s

¹⁸ In Žiga Vodovnik, *iYa Basta!*, 321 & 325.

¹⁹ In the translation in Vodovnik, “Estado de Derecho” is rendered rather literally but awkwardly “State of Law”; I have preferred to substitute it here with the more natural “Rule of Law”.

²⁰ In EZLN 3, *Documentos y comunicados* (México: Ediciones Era, 1997), 287; my translation.

discourse contended that “national sovereignty resides in the state,” Marcos and the Zapatistas claimed that “national sovereignty resides...in the Mexican people.” Some have even seen in Marcos the espouser of a fundamentally anti-statist discourse²¹ --a far from implausible assertion given such statements as “We are saying, ‘Let’s destroy this state, this state system. Let’s open up this space and confront the people with ideas...’”²²

Regardless, however, of whether or not Marcos promoted an anti-statist philosophy, it can certainly be argued that he helped bring about an end to the State-Party system (i.e. the more than seven-decades’ long rule of the PRI) through a discourse that both savagely critiqued the governments of Salinas (1988-1994) and Zedillo (1994-2000), and which also placed repeated emphasis on deepening democracy through the promotion of, and commitment to,

...a democracy that will create a new relationship between those who govern and those who are governed...[in which]... representative democracy would...enrich itself with direct democracy, with the continual participation of the citizens, not

²¹ See Gideon Baker, *Civil Society and Democratic Theory: Alternative Voices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 138, 140 & 307; Gustavo Esteva, “The ‘Other Campaign’ and the Left: Reclaiming an Alternative”, *Z Magazine* (December 17, 2006); posted on the Internet at: <http://www.zcommunications.org/the-other-campaign-and-the-left-reclaiming-an-alternative-by-gustavo-esteva-1-2>; and, most recently, Jeff Conant, *A Poetics of Resistance: The Revolutionary Public Relations of the Zapatista Insurgency* (California: AK Press, 2010), 230.

²² In *Autonomea*, *iZapatistas!*, 298. See too, Marcos’ communiqué dated August 8, 1997, and translated in John Holloway and Eloína Peláez, “Introduction: Reinventing Revolution”, 1-18 in their (eds.) *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 4: “...we do not want offices or posts in the government. They do not understand that we are struggling not for the stairs to be swept clean from the top to the bottom, but for there to be no stairs, for there to be no kingdom at all...” Here, the “kingdom” could very easily be interpreted as referring to the State.

only as electors or as consumers of electoral proposals, but also as political actors.²³

In sum then, the Subcommander—and I would highlight Marcos specifically, as opposed to the indigenous Zapatista movement as a whole—successfully challenged the dominant discourse of the government by producing a compelling counter-hegemonic discourse.

There is, however, another arena in which Marcos as an individual has proved successful: the domain of literature. As Jeff Conant (2010, 358, n. 55) has noted, the Subcommander “has been nominated for the Premio Chiapas de Literatura (by noted Chiapanecan poets José Emilio Pacheco, Juan Bañuelos and Óscar Oliva), and for the Premio Chiapas en Arte, with support from esteemed literary figures such as Eduardo Galeano, Elena Poniatowska, and José Emilio Pacheco, among others...”²⁴ Various other eminent writers and intellectuals have also gone on record attesting to Marcos’ literary prowess. For example, Régis Debray (1995) dubbed the Subcomandante the best contemporary Latin American writer, while Ilan Stavans (1997, 481) calls him “...one of the most imaginative revolutionaries of this century and an essayist of the first order”, adding “his writing exemplifies a true crossroads where Latin American politics and literature meet”.

This latter aspect of the Subcommander’s literary output, namely its fusion of the cultural and political, has been pointed up by other notable commentators too. For example, Christopher Domínguez Michael (1999, 68) comments that the “novelty of the political literature of Marcos would be that, as seldom in the history of intellectual engagement, it is a cultural politics”; Ignacio Corona and Beth E.

²³ Marcos, in Marta Duran de Huerta and Nicholas Higgins, “An interview with Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, spokesperson and military commander of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN)”, *International Affairs* (75, 2, Apr. 1999): 269-279, on 272.

²⁴ Conant is here drawing on Vanden Berghe, *Narrativa de la rebelión zapatista: los relatos del Subcomandante Marcos* (Madrid / Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana / Vervuert, 2005), 51.

Jørgensen (2002, 244) state that “...Marcos’s communiqués and stories...offer an opportunity to analyze...the complex intermingling of aesthetic and political agency in cultural production”; while Cornelia Graebner (2011, n. pag.) writes that “Marcos’ writing places the literary and the political into a constant dialogue with each other”, adding that he “makes sophisticated use of literary devices for the sake of public relations; but, simultaneously, the sophisticated literary manifestations of his conception of politics enrich literature...”

Of course, not everyone agrees regarding the Subcommander’s literary accomplishments, and as Brian Gollnick (2008, 155) points out ...opinions about Marcos as a writer correlate well with opinions about the EZLN as a social movement, and those opinions also correlate with positions on the history of radical politics in general. Determinations of literary worth are thus standing in for political judgments: if the EZLN represents a progressive political force, Marcos is a great writer; if not, he is a dangerous hack.

Christopher Domínguez Michael (1999, 65) perhaps comes closest in his assessment of the Subcommander as a writer, declaring that it’s “a waste of time to judge the writings of Marcos as good or bad literature. It is as foolish to consecrate him a great poet as to dismiss him as a failed writer... His triumph is in the shape of a pamphleteer.” Certainly a similar view is echoed by Enrique Krauze (2011, 441), who describes the Subcommander as “...a powerful pamphleteer in the eighteenth-century tradition.”

Finally, and linked to his literary output, is the Subcommander’s contribution to the promotion of anti-gender and sexual orientation discrimination, an issue which Marcos devoted considerable space to in his co-authored (with Paco Ignacio Taibo II) novel *Muertos incómodos (falta lo que falta)*, and which he also publicized while touring on the “Other Campaign” in 2006, as well as in his discourse thereafter. Such an emphasis both showed a marked departure from the sexist and homophobic attitude sometimes demonstrated by previous Latin

American left-wing guerrillas and also offered up a challenge to Mexico's traditionally macho social discourse.²⁵

In terms of the domestic scene then, in addition to the above, I would add that Marcos also injected ethics into politics, and in doing so stands in stark contrast to Mexico's largely discredited political class.²⁶ Meanwhile, internationally, according to Brian Gollnick's appraisal (2008, 155), "...Subcomandante Marcos has done more than any other individual in the last decade to alter the discourse and iconography of the global left." In fact, Marcos became a shining beacon of the anti-globalization movement and a leading icon for the world's progressive left by acting as a vocal counterweight to the near totalitarianism of the neoliberal drone and those who have forgotten that there was a time, not so very long ago, when voices other than those preaching the pre-eminence of profit could be heard during one's daily routine.

In recent years some have argued that for the young, and especially Mexico's youth, Marcos is not a political figure, author or inspirational role model but merely another "celebrity".²⁷ However, even if such an observation were to contain an element of truth, surely it is preferable that the youth of Mexico (and indeed the world) turn their gaze toward someone possessed of intellect, a sense of self-sacrifice and

²⁵ Commenting on Mexico's dominant social narrative in general, Hermann Herlinghaus, "Subcomandante Marcos: Narrative Policy and Epistemological Project," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* (14, 1, March 2005): 53-74, on 53, notes how prior to the Zapatista uprising what had been projected was "a nationalist, metropolitan, homogeneous, narcissistic discourse", but that "Subcomandante Marcos...gave a crucial impulse to...the emergence of a different imaginary."

²⁶ See Luis Hernández Navarro, "Images of the Dirty TV-War: The Hour of Mediocracy", *Latin American Perspectives* (147, 33, 2, 2006): 70-77, at 73-75, who, after first noting how "The Mexican political class is about to exhaust its last reserves of credibility...", then summarizes the various scandals that had recently befallen the PAN, the PVEM (Mexico's environmental party) and the PRD.

²⁷ E.g. Enrique Krauze, *Redeemers: Ideas and Power in Latin America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 447.

duty, who is articulate, erudite, and witty, who is committed to ideals and displays personal courage, in short a man of both words and actions, rather than toward the usual celebrity fodder which consists, in large part (though not exclusively so), of materialistic, vacuous, inane and self-serving individuals.

Of course, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Marcos was solely responsible for all of the achievements laid out above: well before Marcos made his debut on the national stage, democracy had been deepening, dissatisfaction with the PRI had been mounting, social movements had been strengthening, and indigenous organization had been growing apace. More accurately, Marcos can be said to have contributed, in varying degrees, to these processes. Sometimes he proved the proverbial nail in the coffin to the detrimental attitudes, policies or practices outlined above; at other times he was merely one more ‘coffin bearer’ helping such harms on their way to the grave—although even in these instances he tended to be the most witty, erudite, articulate and vociferous of the ‘pallbearers.’ Consequently, for this writer Marcos will forever stand as an example of how someone imbued with irreproachable moral authority and tremendous personal charisma can, through eloquently expressing righteous indignation at the plight of the poor and oppressed, both overturn prevalent prejudices and entrenched discrimination, and stir conscience of society. In this sense he joins a pantheon that includes, among others, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi.

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