

The Inconvenience of Revolution: Zapatismo, Cynicism and Memory

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Objection, evasion, joyous distrust, and love of irony are signs of health; everything absolute belongs to pathology.

—Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

On January 1, 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, San Cristóbal de las Casas—a touristy, colonial, middle-sized city in the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas—woke up to a sight no longer thought possible at the time: more than a thousand men and women, mostly indigenous peasants with ski masks covering their faces and armed with wooden guns, had taken over the city during the early morning. Later in the day, after identifying themselves as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (the Zapatista National Liberation Army) and releasing their first communiqué, a masked man carrying a machine gun and appearing to be one of the leaders of the uprising was speaking in front of cameras surrounded by a crowd torn between feeling surprised or afraid. Raising his voice, a clearly annoyed tourist guide was trying to explain to the masked man that he had to take some tourists to see the ruins of Palenque—a major Mayan archeological site some six hours away by bus from San Cristóbal—and needed to

leave the city immediately. The masked man, who later became known as Subcomandante Marcos, calmly answered: “The road to Palenque is closed. We have taken Ocosingo [a town on the way to Palenque]. We apologize for any inconvenience but this is a revolution” (Vázquez 81-2).¹

The Zapatista inconvenience was profoundly felt in Mexico City, where the political and economic elites were celebrating the free-trade agreement that was supposed to allow Mexico to finally enter the club of developed nations. The inconvenience, however, ruined the celebrations by clearly showing the poverty, marginalization and oblivion of Mexico’s indigenous population. As John Womack notes in his introduction to *Rebellion in Chiapas*, “a public hoping through NAFTA to establish itself in ‘the First World’ suddenly had to recognize how deeply a part of ‘the Third World’ it also remained” (44).

Few would contest the claim that the Zapatistas no longer command a central position in Mexican or international political life.² In the intervening years, much has been written about the Zapatista movement and its most famous spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, who in May 2014 announced that he was stepping down from this role.³ Yet, as Mihalis Mentinis argues in *Zapatistas*, the four most common approaches to the Zapatista revolt—namely, “the Gramscian approach, Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse, academic ‘autonomist Marxist’ perspectives, and non-academic left and radical left approaches”—are unable to theoretically account for what he calls “the unique character of the Zapatista rebellion” (31). The main problem with these analyses, Mentinis suggests, is that they tend to see the Zapatista uprising and political practices as the materialization of a preconceived theoretical framework and thus as a case study.

In his recent *Returning to Revolution*, however, Thomas Nail brings a fresh perspective to the analysis of the Zapatista revolt by focusing not on the Zapatista uprising itself but on how it has influenced many recent social protests and

¹ According to Vázquez, this anecdote was originally reported in the British newspaper *The Guardian* on January 5, 1994.

² The Zapatistas’ retreat from both the national and international political arenas has its origin in the creation of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Councils of Good Government) back in 2003 and their decision to gradually withdraw from participating in Mexico’s political life and the anti-Neoliberal global movement in order to focus on self-governance and the development of their own communities. It is estimated nowadays that about 200,000 people, mostly indigenous, live in autonomous municipalities under the guidance of five Juntas de Buen Gobierno. See Baronnet, Mora Bayo & Stahler-Sholk for a thorough analysis of indigenous political practices in the autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas.

³ See, for instance, Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas*; Marcos, *Our Word Is our Weapon*; Mentinis, *Zapatistas*; and Khasnabish, *Zapatistas*.

revolutionary activity, including, among others, the Occupy movement, “the Arab Spring, the occupations in Wisconsin, the riots against austerity measures in Europe and the UK, and the occupations by the Spanish *indignados* and the Greeks at Syntagma Square” (viii). Nail argues that these social movements share many principles and strategies such as “horizontal and leaderless networking, consensus decision-making and a multi-fronted struggle equally inclusive of race, class, gender, sexuality and environmental issues” (ix), and he traces back the origins of this commonality to the alter-globalization movement, which originated “from the first and largest global anti-neoliberal gatherings: the Intercontinental *Encuentros* organized by the Zapatistas” (ix) in 1996 (in Chiapas, Mexico) and 1997 (in Madrid, Spain). This leads Nail to conclude that the Zapatistas political principles and strategies such as their “declarations against all forms of domination, their strategic refusal of capturing state or party power, their creation of democratic consensus-based communes, and their vision of a mutual global solidarity network...have had a lasting impact on revolutionary theory and practice” (5-6).

Nail’s main concern throughout his book is to identify four strategies that have characterized this return to revolution, namely, “(1) a multi-centered diagnostic of political power; (2) a prefigurative strategy of political transformation; (3) a participatory strategy of creating a body politic; and (4) a political strategy of belonging based on mutual global solidarity” (2).⁴ In what follows, I want to supplement Nail’s analysis of the influential aspects of Zapatista political practices by focusing on two features of Zapatismo that have been largely overlooked yet I believe were fundamental for the Zapatistas’ ability to cross national boundaries and influence activists all over the world. The first feature is related to how the Zapatistas’ discourse and political practices were read outside the indigenous communities in which Zapatismo originated, namely, as following in the footsteps of ancient

⁴ Nail comes up with these four strategies by analyzing the political principles developed by the Zapatistas along with the impact of Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical work on what he calls “the return to revolution” (see pages 30-34 for a short explanation of these four strategies). Nail clearly states that he is not arguing “for a direct mutual influence between Deleuze and Guattari and the Zapatistas,” nor for using “Deleuze and Guattari’s political philosophy to interpret, explain or understand the Zapatistas” or “the Zapatista uprising to legitimate, ground or justify Deleuze and Guattari’s political philosophy” (6). To do so, Nail rightly states, would not only presuppose a “privileged foundationalism of theory over practice, or practice over theory,” but would also risk “perpetuating a long legacy of Eurocentrism and theoretical imperialism” (6).

Cynicism⁵ and its long tradition of political resistance and the use of *parrhēsia*, that is, telling the naked truth from a position of “inferiority” and under the threat of violence.⁶ If this first aspect is extrinsic to the Zapatista experience itself, the second feature is intrinsic to them and stems from the role of what I will call the Zapatistas’ fecund, living memory, that is, the place-specific memory that derives from everyday experience and learning, and therefore cannot be systematized and applied universally. I believe that the combination of these two aspects—one extrinsic and universalizable, the other intrinsic and particular—is greatly responsible for Zapatismo’s influence and appeal since it allowed a wide array of activists and revolutionaries, indigenous and non-indigenous, from across the world to partake, following Alain Badiou, in the political truth of Zapatismo.⁷ These two aspects of Zapatismo, I contend, have largely been overlooked because they feature most prominently in the Zapatistas’ more literary texts—that is, in novels, stories, parables and folktales penned almost exclusively by Subcomandante Marcos—rather than in their political Declarations, and the former have been mostly set aside from theoretical scrutiny and elaboration.⁸ In what follows, I will therefore focus my analysis mainly on Marcos’ novel *The Uncomfortable Dead*, co-written with Paco Ignacio Taibo II, and his stories of Don Durito and Old Antonio. But first a cautionary note.

In *Thresholds of Illiteracy*, Abraham Acosta argues that the emphasis put both within and outside academia on Marcos’ persona seems to confirm “the public’s curiosity about a Western man interested in indigenous issues, not the indigenous issues or indigenous people themselves. In other words, this investment in Subcomandante Marcos ultimately...reproduces the trope...that non-Western peoples simply cannot be understood without cultural mediation” (169). Therefore, Acosta

⁵ Throughout this article, I will use ‘Cynicism’ and ‘Cynic’, with a capital ‘C’, when referring to ancient Cynicism and reserve ‘cynicism’ and ‘cynic’, with a lowercase ‘c’, for its modern incarnation.

⁶ I’m not arguing that the Zapatistas are some sort of modern or post-modern Cynics. That is, it is not my intention to suggest that the Zapatistas were directly influenced by Cynicism or classical Greek thought in general. In fact, I’m not aware that the Cynics are even mentioned or referenced in any Zapatista text. What I’m suggesting instead is that non-indigenous Westerners associated, even if unconsciously or unknowingly, certain Zapatista gestures, practices and attitudes to the long Cynic tradition of contestation, truth-telling and political resistance in order to partake, paraphrasing Badiou, in the political truth of Zapatismo. In this sense, Nail’s warning regarding reading Deleuze and Guattari philosophical work along with the Zapatistas political practices also applies to this article and the connection I’m making between Zapatismo and Cynicism.

⁷ For Badiou’s theory of the political truth procedure, see his *Metapolitics* and “The Idea of Communism.”

⁸ Notable exceptions are Vanden Berghe (2005; 2007; 2011, chapter 1) and Di Piramo (2011).

further argues, most scholarship on Zapatismo can be read as an attempt to translate “indigenous ‘silence’ into Western speech” when it should instead be read as “a direct challenge against such transcultural interpretive conventions” (25).

The imposing presence of Marcos in the Zapatista uprising does indeed seem to contradict both the indigenous nature and the horizontality of the Zapatistas’ political project and discourse. Yet, it might be argued, as Alan Badiou does in “The Idea of Communism,” that this emphasis on what he calls “the proper names of revolutionary politics”—names such as Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Lenin, Mao and, of course, Marcos—might not only be unavoidable but actually necessary given that “proper names symbolize historically...the rare and precious network of ephemeral sequences of politics as truth” (250). In other words, the proper name, Badiou suggests, is what allows people to understand as being one the anonymous actions of a multiplicity of militants, rebels, revolutionaries and fighters without necessarily conflating the proper name with the many it stands for or what it symbolizes. Marcos, in any case, is an awkward proper name because even if the name does stand for an individual, Marcos’ own subjectivity is undermined by the use of a mask and his own subversion of his persona. In this sense, the proper name Marcos is not individuated but made to embody all masked Zapatistas; or, as Nail suggests, Marcos “does not represent the Zapatistas, but is himself a multiplicity” (25).⁹

Seen in this light, it can be argued that Marcos both confirms and challenges the importance Badiou gives to proper names, as well as Acosta’s cautionary note on the emphasis placed on Marcos. Moreover, it can also be argued that reading Zapatismo as partaking in the long tradition of Cynicism and courageous truth telling essentially amounts to associating Zapatismo with that particular branch of philosophical thought and practice that the West itself has marginalized from its philosophical tradition yet remains very much alive in the popular imagination.¹⁰ In

⁹ Or, as Marcos famously put it in a communiqué of May 28, 1994, he “is gay in San Francisco, Black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, Chicano in San Isidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel...Marcos is a human being in this world. Marcos is every untolerated, oppressed, exploited minority that is resisting and saying ‘Enough!’” (*Zapatistas!* 313). For the Spanish original, see <http://www.bibliotecas.tv/chiapas/may94/28may94.html> (accessed May 22, 2017).

¹⁰ Cynicism’s exclusion from the Western philosophical canon can perhaps be traced back to Hegel, who dismissed the Cynics by noting that they were “nothing more than swinish beggars, who found their satisfaction in the insolence that they showed others. They are worthy of no further consideration in philosophy, and they deserve fully the name of dogs, which was early given to them; for the dog is a shameless animal” (quoted in Navia, 103). For Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting in “The Modern Reception of Cynicism,” Hegel’s remarks are largely responsible for Cynicism’s marginality in the modern historiography of philosophy

this sense, it can be argued that Cynicism not only goes against the grain of what is considered the Western canon, but also questions “Eurocentrism and theoretical imperialism” (Nail 6). In this article, however, I do not attempt to prove or disprove that Marcos’ political and literary discourse, either considered subjectively or as the expression of a multiplicity, functions as a mediator between indigenous and non-indigenous people. I rather choose to inhabit this tension by examining the extrinsic and universalizable reading of Zapatismo as partaking in the long tradition of Cynicism and courageous truth telling along with the particular, fecund and living memory of the Zapatistas’ experience.

Who Should Ask for Pardon?

In its common meaning, “to apologize” entails offering an excuse for some fault, failure, insult or injury for doing or saying something one is not supposed to do or say, something that goes against the moral standards and perhaps even against the law. In this sense, the Zapatistas’ apology for the inconvenience of revolution is clearly ironic, something the Mexican government seems to not have noticed. On January 12, 1994, a few days after the Zapatista uprising, then President Carlos Salinas de Gortari declared a unilateral ceasefire and announced that Zapatista combatants would be granted pardon if they dispose of their arms: “I reiterate that those who participated under pressure or out of despair, and that now accept peace and legality, will find pardon” (quoted in Montemayor 56; my translation). Salinas’ sovereign decision to grant the Zapatistas pardon is, as with any sovereign decision, a performative utterance that aims to change the reality it is describing and whose consequences are allegedly known in advance. In this case, when Salinas said that the Zapatistas would be granted pardon he was already pardoning them; the Zapatistas, in turn, were expected to go along by accepting the sovereign’s pardon, apologizing in earnest for any inconvenience they might have caused. Yet, as Jacques Lezra notes in

given that he first reduced the history of philosophy to the history of ideas, something that later led to the belief that only theoretical arguments and systems are of importance for the history of philosophy. “Before this shift,” Niehues-Pröbsting argues, “the transmission of biographies had a large place in the historiography of philosophy, for the life of the philosopher was believed to be of exemplary character and was considered the verification of the doctrine” (330). After Hegel, Niehues-Pröbsting concludes, those philosophers who, like the Cynics, did not leave behind a written account of their concepts and ideas, and had previously become part of the tradition *only* by virtue of their “exemplary individuality or their idiosyncratic personalities” (331) were marginalized and excluded from the Western canon; consequently, the way a philosopher conducted itself and lived its life was no longer deemed relevant or worth considering.

Wild Materialism, besides being a performative act or utterance “that inhabits the present,” a sovereign decision is also “an indeterminate act or utterance subject to veridification, neutral...with respect to its truth value,” which means that sovereign decisions are always “future-contingent propositions” threatened by “infelicities and unpredictabilities” and therefore open to “the possibility of resistance” (99).

The possibility of resistance to Salinas’ sovereign decision did indeed arise a few days later, on January 18, when the Zapatistas challenged the sovereign pardon by publishing in various Mexican newspapers “one of the most eloquent communiqués in the history of armed movements in Mexico” (Montemayor, 1997: 56; my translation). The communiqué—entitled “Who Should Ask for Pardon and Who Can Grant It?”—not only stated many of the reasons behind the Zapatista uprising—poverty, exclusion, oblivion, injustice—but also shattered the sovereign’s performative utterance:

Why do we need to be pardoned? What are they going to pardon us for? For not dying of hunger? For not accepting our misery in silence? For not accepting humbly the historic burden of disdain and abandonment? For having risen up in arms after we found all other paths closed? ... For bringing guns to battle instead of bows and arrows? ... For being mainly indigenous? ... For fighting for liberty, democracy, and justice? ... For refusing to surrender? For refusing to sell ourselves out? Who should ask for pardon, and who can grant it? ... Should we ask for pardon from those who deny us the right and capacity to govern ourselves? From those who don’t respect our customs or our culture and who ask us for identification papers and obedience to a law whose existence and moral basis we don’t accept? From those who oppress us, torture us, assassinate us, disappear us for the grave ‘crime’ of wanting a piece of land...on which we can grow something to fill our stomachs? Who should ask for pardon and who can grant it? (Marcos, *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, 38-9)

The Zapatista response to Salinas’ pardon is more than an eloquent justification for the uprising or a simple rejection of the sovereign’s performative utterance, a speech that altogether refuses to enter into the sovereign relation.

The Zapatista refusal to simply accept the sovereign’s favor brings to mind one of the most famous anecdotes attributed to Diogenes of Sinope, the paradigmatic Cynic. As the story goes, Alexander the Great, who had heard talk about Diogenes and wanted to meet him, found him one day sunning himself in the outskirts of Corinth. Alexander, the sovereign par excellence, asked Diogenes if there was anything he could do for him. Diogenes, in turn, simply told Alexander to stand less between the sun and him, adding afterwards that he was taking from him what he couldn’t give: sunlight. With this gesture, Diogenes not only refused what Alexander

stood for—power, authority and prestige, for instance—but, more importantly, rejected the sovereign relation itself, that is, rejected the act of exchanging his freedom for the sovereign’s protection.¹¹

The Greeks called this type of speech *parrhēsia* and regarded it as essential for meaningful political life. As Foucault notes in *The Government of Self and Others*, “in this speech act or discourse of injustice proclaimed by the weak against the powerful...there is at once a way of emphasizing one’s own right, and also a way of challenging the all-powerful with the truth of his injustice” (133), which is what the Zapatista response to Salinas makes evident. Yet, more than free speech pure and simple, *parrhēsia* was regarded as a modality of truth telling linked to courage in the face of danger. Because the person telling the truth has decided not to remain silent and out of danger, *parrhēsia* also entailed an ethical choice: the speaker *chooses* to speak the truth *in spite of* the risk it involves and regardless of the consequences. In Diogenes’ case, this risk involved the possibility of unleashing Alexander’s rage and being killed on the spot; for the Zapatistas, it involved the possibility of triggering the Mexican State’s violent reaction, which in fact has periodically been the case.

As I mentioned above, I’m not suggesting that Zapatismo appropriates or is directly influenced by Cynicism and the Cynics’ use of *parrhēsia*. Instead, I’m suggesting that there are certain intrinsic characteristics of Zapatismo that can extrinsically be read as partaking in the Cynic tradition, a reading that the novel *The Uncomfortable Dead*, co-written by Marcos and Paco Ignacio Taibo II, certainly allows for.

Cynicism and courageous truth telling in The Uncomfortable Dead

The Uncomfortable Dead was originally published in serial form in Spanish in the Sunday cultural supplement of the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* between November

¹¹ There are plenty of anecdotes about Diogenes’ life that both express and help us to understand the essence of Cynicism. For instance, it is said that when Plato defined man as a featherless biped, Diogenes plucked a chicken and, setting it free, declared, “Behold, I bring you a man.” Likewise, Diogenes purportedly farted during Plato’s exposition of his theory of ideas and masturbated in public as an answer to Plato’s theory of Eros. For a compilation of Cynics’ writings and anecdotes, see Dobbin, *The Cynic Philosophers*; for a comprehensive account of Diogenes of Sinope’s life and Cynicism in general, see Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope*; for Cynicism’s legacy and its influence in modern thought, see Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment*, and Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*.

2004 and February 2005.¹² Each week one of the authors wrote a chapter of the novel and handed it over to the other author, who then wrote the next chapter in response. According to Taibo, the only guidelines were set by Marcos in a letter suggesting he write “a police (detective) novel with four hands in two different places and distances, improvising (along the way) as if it were a Ping-Pong game but with words instead of balls” (Thornton 504).

Many reviews and critiques of the novel focus on Marcos’ literary shortcomings as a novelist and the novel’s unpolished quality.¹³ Circumscribed by time and the self-imposed improvisational nature of the project, the novel does feel rushed; moreover, Marcos’ writing, on a pure formalistic level, seems better suited for short stories, fables and communiqués. Yet, these critiques, valid as they might be, overlook precisely what makes the novel worth examining. *The Uncomfortable Dead* is clearly an experimental project that, just like the Zapatista uprising, has no outline, set storyline or predetermined ending. The novel’s improvisational nature, in fact, aims to capture the dialogic nature of the Zapatista revolt. As Marcos put it in a letter to Adolfo Gilly in 1995, “in reality, the only thing we have resolved to do is change the world, the rest we have been improvising” (quoted in Lorenzano 126).¹⁴ Indeed, in contrast with most, if not all, revolutionary movements in Latin America for whom insurgency was merely the means to reach a goal set in advance—for instance, taking over power and reforming the state according to socialist or communist principles—the Zapatistas opted instead for a non-programmatic path in which the experience itself is more important than reaching an already calculated destination. As such, “changing the world” becomes a motivation rather than a goal

The Uncomfortable Dead narrates the adventures of Elías Contreras, the Zapatistas’ one-person investigations commission, and Héctor Belascoarán Shayne, the famous protagonist of Paco Ignacio Taibo II’s series of detective novels. In the novel, Contreras—who is, as he himself acknowledges at the very beginning of the novel, already dead—is sent by the Zapatistas to Mexico City to find “a certain Morales” accused of being involved, alongside former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, in the much-resisted privatization of the Montes Azules Nature Reserve in

¹² The novel was later published in book format as *Muertos incómodos (falta lo que falta): Novela a cuatro manos*. All quotes in this article are from the book’s English translation as *The Uncomfortable Dead*. The original Spanish title could also be translated as *The Inconvenient Dead*.

¹³ See, for instance, Vanden Berghe, “Cambios y constantes”; García Ramírez, “Muertos Incómodos”; and Slivka, “Leftist Noir.”

¹⁴ The letter was originally published in *Viento del Sur* 4 (verano 1995).

Chiapas. Belascoarán, for his part, is also looking for “a certain Morales” who allegedly spied for the government during the 1968 student movement, and later tortured and killed some of those involved with the movement. The two loosely collaborate with each other and, at least for the first half of the novel, the reader is made to believe that both characters are looking for the same Morales.

Yet, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Contreras and Belascoarán are looking for just two of many different Morales, among them an ex-guerrilla member who betrayed his comrades; a torturer who worked for the Luis Echeverría government; a Government agent who spied on the 1968 student movement; a housing coordinator who profited from his role during the 1985 earthquake; one of the intellectual authors of the 1997 Acteal massacre in Chiapas; and a facilitator for the expropriation and privatization of Chiapas’ natural resources. The fact that these different persons are given in the novel the same name suggests that more than exposing the criminal behavior of particular individuals in an otherwise beneficial or, at least, neutral politico-economic system, *The Uncomfortable Dead* offers a critique of a type of relation inherent to capitalism, particularly in its globalizing, neoliberal configuration. This relation can perhaps be understood, via its juxtaposition with ancient Cynicism, as modern cynicism, which Peter Sloterdijk conceptualizes in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* as the instrumentalization of enlightened reason with the intention of producing, maintaining and reproducing relations of domination from which the modern cynic benefits or profits.

Indeed, if the Enlightenment was primarily a critique of traditional absolutes that aimed to do away with the deceitful structuring discourses and beliefs upon which everyday life was misleadingly lived (anthropocentrism, Christian metaphysics, etc.), Sloterdijk argues that the Enlightenment’s promise has only been partially and inconsistently fulfilled because we have not been able to rise above what Kant called our “self-incurred tutelage.” The on-going condition of tutelage in which we currently live, however, is according to Sloterdijk no longer the result of ignorance but of what he calls “enlightened false consciousness:”

[Modern] [c]ynicism is *enlightened false consciousness*. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered. (5)

Enlightened false consciousness is cynical because the subject, even if aware of the fabricated nature of his beliefs and opinions, as well as the potentially nefarious consequences of his actions, does not seem to care and chooses to act and relate to others *as if* he did not know. In this sense, modern cynicism can be regarded as the restitution of the dominion of ideology with the intention of perpetuating a situation or relation that is seen as beneficial. As such, the modern cynic is always either in a position of power or an ally of power. Even if he consciously knows that his opinions and actions are injurious and unjust, the cynic nonetheless justifies them in the name of an alleged higher purpose.

In *The Uncomfortable Dead*, Morales is clearly presented as the epitome of modern cynicism. He not only knowingly exploits and benefits from a system he regards as always-already rigged, but also openly admits it:

I don't want you to get the idea that I'm a cynic. I'm just a realist, and reality shows that he who fucks not gets fucked. I certainly make deals, and don't come to me now with this foolishness about ethics and fairness, because all business is dirty; it's always a matter of buying low and selling high. Otherwise, how do you think the high and mighty of Mexico and the world made their great fortunes? Everything is for sale and anything can be bought: your land, your body, your conscience, your country. Okay, so maybe I didn't always buy—I took, I pillaged—but if it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else ... Betrayal, you say? Well, that's a matter of how you look at it... I killed? Well...yes! But the fact is, you can't get up there without getting your hands a little dirty... Why do you say I cheated? I didn't cheat any more than any politician or businessman. Well, yes, there are degrees. In this matter of doing evil, there are amateurs and professionals; me, I'm a pro, but I started as an amateur. I still hope to get into the big leagues, into politics, and who knows, I might even have a shot at president of the republic. Others have done it, so why not me? ...Afraid of the law? Come on, get serious. Haven't you understood yet that we *are* the law? (171-74)

For Morales, the ends clearly justify the means and any ethical, moral or philosophical questioning of his behavior is beyond the point: the game is rigged, the die is cast and whoever does not try to benefit from it is essentially a moron.

As such, modern cynicism is far removed from ancient Cynicism. In fact, it might even be said that the former has become exactly the opposite of the latter. As Slavoj Žižek notes in his discussion of Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*, ancient Cynicism

Represents the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm: the classical [C]ynical procedure is to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology—its solemn, grave tonality—with everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing behind the

sublime noblesse of the ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power. (Žižek, 26)

Indeed, if the modern cynic allies himself with power and authority, benefits from the status quo and thus aims to perpetuate it, the classical Cynic was considered an extravagant, opinionated and stubborn instigator or provocateur who dared to speak the naked truth. The Cynics based their sharp critique on humor, satire and irony. They mocked and broke social conventions, parodied moral discourses and shunned power and respect. Moreover, they attacked public institutions, the philosophers' self-righteousness, the arbitrariness of the law and the world's spiritual poverty (Dobbin; Navia; Branham and Goulet-Cazé). As Sloterdijk notes, the Cynic knew that even if "it is true that knowledge is power...it is also true that not all knowledge is welcomed with open arms" (11). It was precisely this hidden truth, this unwelcomed knowledge that the Cynics articulated.

In spite of this, or perhaps precisely because of this, Cynicism is, as I noted above, commonly regarded as a marginal branch of ancient philosophy, in great part because it did not hand down a written, organized and somewhat specific doctrine, as was the case with Platonism and Aristotelianism. As Luis Navia suggests in *Diogenes of Sinope*,

Cynicism...was not a *system* of ideas in which we can identify well-delineated components or a hierarchical scheme of philosophical tenets. Far more than a theoretical stance vis-à-vis the world, Cynicism was a *response*, a *reaction*, to those conditions of human existence that the Cynics...found unacceptable from the point of view of reason. (viii)

The Cynics' critique, Navia adds, was rather expressed in aphorism, axioms, anecdotes, gestures, comments and behaviors intended to deface and undermine accepted norms or values that the Cynics regarded as life-diminishing and false.¹⁵ Seen in this light, the Zapatistas' rejection of teleological theoretical approaches—exemplified by their motto *preguntando caminamos* (we walk by asking)—their use of fables, anecdotes and irony, and their unrelenting critique of neoliberalism both as an economic system and a moral doctrine allows for a reading that extrinsically places Zapatismo along the long Cynic tradition of resistance and courageous truth-telling.

¹⁵ In an interview with Sergio Rodríguez Lascano, Marcos articulates a similar position towards accepted norms and values by stating that Zapatismo is "a plebeian, rebel, movement with bad grammar, that puts its feet up on the table, that eats with its elbows also on the table...that doesn't follow the established criteria" (Rodríguez, "A Message for the Intellectuals").

To go back to Abraham Acosta's point discussed in the introduction, this might indeed be regarded as an instance of indigenous silence translated into Western speech. Yet, for better or worse, this act of translation, which is not necessarily an act of appropriation, might have in part been, as Nail argues, what allowed Zapatismo to influence later social movements and revolutionary activity.

Diogenes' truth-telling allegedly followed the Oracle's advice to "change the value of the currency", that is, to question and change the laws, rules, habits, conventions and customs of the time, which is what Diogenes attempted to achieve through both his constant verbal critiques *and* the way he lived.¹⁶ For the Cynics, however, changing the value of the currency necessitated a specific form of *parrhēsia* that entailed changing one's own life so as to live according to those changes one wanted to accomplish. In *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault differentiates three types of *parrhēsia*: (1) the courageous truth telling of the political adviser who tells the sovereign something other than what he wants to hear; (2) what Foucault calls Socratic irony, that is, "telling people, and getting them gradually to recognize, that they do not really know what they say and think they know" (233); and (3) Cynic *parrhēsia*. Even if in these three cases of courageous truth telling—political, Socratic and Cynic—one risks one's life in order to tell the truth, by telling the truth and/or for having told the truth, only in Cynic *parrhēsia* does one *also* risk one's life "by the very way in which one lives...not [only] through one's discourses, but through one's life itself" (234). As Foucault notes in *Discourse and Truth*, Cynic *parrhēsia* was not just a matter of "altering one's belief or opinion," but rather, "of changing one's style of life, one's relation to others, and one's relation to oneself" (n. p.). In an interview with Jesús Quintero, Marcos articulates a similar position by suggesting that the Zapatistas "think that society, and the world, should be transformed from below. We think we also have to transform ourselves: in our personal relations, in culture, in art, in communication...and create another kind of society, in such a way that power, or he who has power, comes to have another relationship with society" (quoted in Henck, 175).

This need for radical change is also expressed by one of *The Uncomfortable Dead's* narrator, a Philippine homosexual living in a Zapatista community:

It is a known fact that the murderer always returns to the scene of the crime. But just suppose that Elías [Contreras] and [Héctor] Belascoarán are going

¹⁶ See Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope*, for a discussion of the historical veracity of Diogenes' visit to the Oracle of Delphi.

after a murderer, after THE murderer. And if it's who I think it is, THE murderer is not going to return to the scene of the crime. The murderer is the system. Yes! The system... The Evil is the system, and the Bad are those that serve the system. But the Evil is not an entity... No, the Evil is a relationship, it's one position against the other. (Marcos and Taibo, 63)

Despite its simplistic and Manichean formulation, the novel's passage points to what could be regarded as the core of the Zapatista critique, namely, the critique of "the cynicism of late capitalism, which has coagulated into a system" (Sloterdijk, 126). Indeed, the Zapatista uprising not only rejects the instrumentalization of enlightened reason, as the many Morales in the novel do; perhaps more importantly, the Zapatista critique and way of life (their Cynic *parrhēsia*) also upholds that this instrumentalization is inherent to capitalism—particularly in its neoliberal configuration—and thus unmendable: the murderer *is* the system.

Fecund, Living Memory and the Critique of Neoliberalism

The Zapatistas' Cynic critique of neoliberalism, of modern cynicism coagulated into a system, is more explicit in Marcos' tales of Don Durito de la Lacandona, a stubborn and unsettled beetle that sees himself as a knight-errant struggling against the injustices and contradictions of capitalism and State sovereignty. In these stories, Don Durito combines mockery, sarcasm and parody to formulate critiques of war, pretentious guerrilla fighters, the orthodox left and neoliberalism, thereby introducing playfulness and humor—traits that can also be associated with Cynicism—into the alleged seriousness of rebellious politics and practices. Don Durito also serves as a constant reminder not to fall into the cynical trap of justifying the means in order to achieve an end. This is explicitly made clear in a letter written to ten-year-old girl Mariana Moguel on April 10, 1994, in which Don Durito tells Marcos to ask all Zapatistas to step lightly in the jungle so as to avoid stepping on small creatures like him, implying thereby that even rebels should not step on others to achieve their goals (see Marcos, *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, 291-93).

Among Don Durito stories, "Durito and one about statues and birds" is perhaps the one that shows more clearly the Zapatistas' Cynic attitude and their use of *parrhēsia*:

Durito says that Power creates statues, not for writing or recreating its history but rather to promise itself eternity and omnipotence... Its dogmas become laws, constitutions, rules, in sum, they are paper statues that later become stone statues. Power isn't interested in consensus or agreements... It is

interested in domination... In Power, the lack of legitimacy gets solved with dogmas, that is, with statues.

Durito says that a statue is a TRUTH (yes, with capital letters) that hides under the stone both its own inability to demonstrate anything and the arbitrariness of its own existence. Because, according to Durito...a statue expresses both the dominator's own assertion and the marginality of the dominated... The 'intelligent' word of Power appears to be complex but it is pretty simple: it's made of dogmas and statues... Durito says that many ignore that Zapatismo is neither dogma nor statue. Zapatismo, like rebelliousness, is just one among thousands of birds that fly. And just like any bird would do, Durito says, Zapatismo is born, grows, sings, reproduces itself with and in others dies, and, as it is customary for birds, shits on statues. (My translation)¹⁷

The Zapatista "inconvenience" can thus be bluntly conceptualized as the metaphorical act of defecating on the statues erected by power, that is, the allegedly fixed and eternal truths upon which "the cynicism of late capitalism" is based.

The Zapatista critique of the cynicism of late capitalism both originates in and is substantiated by what can be regarded as a re-signification of the indigenous communities' history of struggle and resistance, which is the focus of Marcos' stories about Old Antonio (El Viejo Antonio), who functions in the stories as both moral authority and symbolic founder of Zapatismo. In these stories, Old Antonio recalls mythological tales and fables regarding the long history of indigenous poverty and resistance, as well as the origin of both humans and natural phenomena such as the colors or the rain. According to Jeff Conant, the stories, fables and tales of Old Antonio can be understood as a poetics of resistance, that is, "the resistance of memory against forgetting...of language against the oblivion of silence" by means of which "history is spelled out day by day becoming culture, becoming memory, becoming codes of action handed down by gods, heroes and saints" (37). As such, Old Antonio's tales and stories can be conceptualized as fecund, living memory, that is, memory that does not posit a nostalgic view on a golden past—the stories themselves make it clear that there has not been one—but rather aims, as Old Antonio states in "The Story of the Measure of Memory," to be a "mirror that helps understand the present and promises the future" (Marcos, *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, 395). The idea of memory as living and fecund, as deriving from everyday experience and learning, can be conceptualized by relating it to what the Greeks called *mētis*, which James C. Scott defines in *Seeing Like a State* as "a wide array of practical skills

¹⁷ Originally published in Spanish as "Durito y una de estatuas o pájaros" in *Rebelión* (México), número 8 (junio 2003).

and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment” (313) *Mētis*, Scott adds, “resists simplification into deductive principles which can successfully be transmitted through book learning, because the environments in which it is exercised are so complex and nonrepeatable that formal procedures of rational decision making are impossible to apply” (316). In other words, *mētis* refers to the forms of knowledge embedded in local experience that are opposed to and sometimes subvert the State’s abstract knowledge and need to control, calculate, regulate and homogenize. In this sense, *mētis* alludes to something entirely different than the Greek concepts of *technē* (practical knowledge) and *epistēmē* (theoretical knowledge), particularly in Plato’s thought. These two concepts—although differing in how knowledge originates—refer to two types of knowledge that can be derived from logical deduction and aim for ideal and universal principles. *Mētis*, on the contrary, is contextual and particular; and, just like Cynicism, it is mostly concerned with everyday life, which necessarily has a geographically specific dimension.¹⁸

In the context of Zapatismo, the stories of Old Antonio revolve around Indigenous people’s *mētis*, that is, the locally specific knowledge accumulated by Indigenous people in Chiapas through generations of marginalization and resistance. It is this local experience, this fecund and living memory, that gives context to the most famous Zapatista motto, the very Cynic, *parrhesiastic* and inconvenient ¡Ya basta! (Enough is enough!), a call enunciated from a position of inferiority and under the risk of death that not only serves as a constant reminder of past and present injustices, but also contingently suspends the sovereign’s performative utterance by introducing a contingent that refuses to acknowledge the sovereign relation. The contingent the Zapatistas introduce in the political realm of sovereignty, which might be regarded as one of the main influences of Zapatismo in later social movements, is a different conceptualization of revolution that does not aim to take over the State to change

¹⁸ This clear distinction between the Platonic concepts of *technē* and *epistēmē*, on the one hand, and the more Cynic concept of *mētis*, on the other hand, points to a deeper opposition between Platonism and Cynicism, one that is reflected in the anecdotes I mentioned above of Diogenes mocking Plato. For Robert Branham, the recurrence of Plato in these anecdotes is not incidental. As he argues in “Defacing the Currency,” “the tradition designates [Plato], the paradigmatic metaphysician and plutocrat, as a kind of antitype to the Cynic... If Plato’s paradigm is that of philosophy as *theōria* and the philosopher as a spectator of time and eternity, uniquely able to rise above time and chance, Diogenes’ is just the opposite—the philosopher of contingency, of life in the barrel, of adapting to the *données* of existence, of minimal living. On this view, philosophy is not an escape from but a dialogue with the contingencies that shape the material conditions of existence” (87).

society from above but rather calls into question both the sovereign relation itself and the way we relate to each other under late capitalism.

The Inconvenience of (a Different) Revolution

The Zapatistas' emphasis on their own local, particular experience—on their fecund, living memory—along with the use of political practices and attitudes that can extrinsically be read as partaking in the long tradition of Cynic resistance and truth telling, are at least partially responsible for their ability to develop a different conceptualization of revolution and resistance, one that, as Nail shows in *Returning to Revolution*, has significantly influenced later social movements and revolutionary activity. The Zapatistas' conceptualization of revolution runs counter to how most, if not all, Latin American guerrillas and revolutionary movements previously conceptualized revolution, namely, as taking control of the State in order to implement from above a political, economical and/or social project that was already set in advance. Indeed, Zapatismo can be regarded as an insurgent practice that begins from a premise of incomplete knowledge and consequently opens itself up to the uncertainties and contingencies of the future. As Comandante Tacho, one of the members of the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena—the Zapatista ruling body—succinctly put it, “Revolution is like going to take lessons in a school that has not even been built” (quoted in Holloway, 158). Implicit in this aporetic definition is a critique of the instrumentalization of revolution, that is, of revolution as a mere means to achieve an already-determined end.

Even if “traditional” Latin American insurgencies or revolutionary movements did call capitalism into question, opposing to it, for instance, collective or state ownership of the means of production, they did not question the sovereign relation as such. The Zapatistas' conceptualization of revolution and resistance, on the contrary, not only rejects state power—which they regard as always-already cynical, corrupt and alienating, and therefore incapable of bringing about real change—but also, like the Cynics, the sovereign relation itself. For Holloway, what the Zapatista uprising ultimately suggests is the possibility and need to move “beyond the state illusion [that] puts the state at the center of the concept of radical change” (157).

The Zapatista critique of previous revolutionary movements and the sovereign relation itself is perhaps the most explicit in the story “Chairs of Power and Butterflies of Rebellion:”

Well, it's about how the attitude human beings have about chairs defines them politically. The Revolutionary (like that, with capital R) scorns ordinary chairs and says to others and himself: "I don't have time to sit down, the heavy mission commended to me by History (like that, with capital H) prevents me from distracting myself with nonsense." He goes through life like this until he runs into the chair of Power. He throws off whomever is sitting on the chair with one shot, sits down and frowns, as if he were constipated, and says to others and himself: "History (like that, with capital H) has been fulfilled. Everything, absolutely everything, makes sense now. I am sitting on the Chair (like that, with capital C) and I am the culmination of the times." There he remains until another Revolutionary (like that, with capital R) comes by, throws him off and history (like that, with a small h) repeats itself.

The rebel (like that, with small r), on the other hand, when he sees an ordinary chair, analyzes it carefully, then goes and puts another chair next to it, and another and another, and soon, it looks like a gathering because more rebels (like that, with small r) have come, and then the coffee, tobacco and the word begin to circulate and mix, and then, precisely when everyone starts to feel comfortable, they get antsy, as if they had ants in their pants, and they don't know if it's from the coffee or the tobacco or the word, but everyone gets up and keeps on going the way they were going. And so on until they find another ordinary chair and history repeats itself.

There is only one variation, when the rebel runs into the Seat of Power (like that, with capital S, capital P), looks at it carefully, analyzes it, but instead of sitting there he goes and gets a fingernail file and, with heroic patience, he begins sawing at the legs until they are so fragile that they break when someone sits down, which happens almost immediately. (309)¹⁹

This story alludes to the iconic image of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, among others, congregated around the Presidential Seat in Mexico's National Palace during the pinnacle of the Mexican Revolution. In the image, Villa is sitting comfortably on the Presidential Seat while Zapata, who had suggested that the chair should be burnt to end all ambitions, looks uncomfortable, as if wanting to leave the place as soon as possible. As Conant notes in *A Poetics of Resistance*, the image offers "a whole-cloth representation of Zapata as the selfless warrior for the poor, free of personal ambition, and devoted not to the struggle for power, but to the struggle *against* power" (228). As can be inferred from Durito's tale, it is this Zapata—who rejects Pancho Villa's invitation to sit on the chair and instead suggests that the chair should be destroyed—the Zapatistas modeled themselves after. In this sense, the Zapatistas not only reject power as such, but also reject (like Diogenes in front of Alexander) entering and subjecting themselves to the sovereign relation itself.

¹⁹ This story was originally published in Spanish as part of Marcos' communiqué "A Angel Luis Lara, alias El Ruso: sobre la inauguración del Aguascalientes en Madrid" (October 12, 2002). It can be found online at http://free-news.org/Zapatistas_01.htm.

In the story “Rebellion and Chairs,” Durito not only offers a critique of traditional Revolutionary politics in which taking power becomes a mere formal change in the structure of domination, but also suggests the need to subvert and reject any form of (sovereign) power. Moreover, the story suggests the need to construct the future instead of projecting an already delineated and defined future onto the present. In other words, the story warns against conceptualizing rebellion and revolution as mere means towards an already-determined end, advocating instead considering them as an end in themselves. The inconvenience of this different conceptualization of revolution and rebellion lies in focusing not on how to relate to power but to others and oneself, thereby rendering state power and sovereign reason superfluous or, at least, inconsequential for people’s life.

“Rebellion and Chairs” thus conveys what is perhaps the central component of the Zapatista critique of power. The rebel, Durito notes, contemplates and analyzes the Seat of Power but does not sit down. His aim, instead, is to undermine, subvert and deconstruct the logic, discourses and social constructs upon which the edifice of power is built, which is mainly what the Cynics attempted to do through their use of *parrhēsia* and the way they lived. Yet subverting power, the Zapatistas suggest, takes different forms depending on factors such as locality and history, and therefore cannot be codified, universalized or determined in advance. For the Zapatistas, this means reappropriating and resignifying indigenous and Mexican history (for instance, the image of Zapata), as well as language and the political itself by giving new meanings to worn-out concepts such as democracy, liberty and justice.

Perhaps the clearest formulation of this reworking of language and the political is the Zapatista dictum “command by obeying,” which can succinctly be expressed as a principle of governance that emphasizes that she who has power and/or authority only has it because it has been momentarily lent to her and can thus be taken away if she acts against the interest of the community. At first sight, the principle of “command by obeying” does not seem to differ greatly from, say, Rousseau’s classic conceptualization of the sovereign as he who represents and exercises the general will. Likewise, “command by obeying” seems to be a mere expansion of the liberal concept of democracy so as to include minorities and the subaltern, or to be analogous to the Commune or the Soviets, in which direct democracy and immediate revocability of those in command were two key elements. Yet “command by obeying” marks a clear deviation from previous Latin American insurgent movements that greatly depended on a powerful, charismatic leader or on

some variation of the Leninist vanguard party, as was the case for the Cuban, Guatemalan and Nicaraguan insurgencies.²⁰

On a more political level, “command by obeying” posits a different rationalization for governance, one based not on consenting to an already taken sovereign decision, but rather one in which the decision enters the political from the very beginning. In other words, it does not posit a sovereign that decides and expects unlimited obedience, but rather a sovereign that neither decides nor expects obedience. As such, “command by obeying” is a principle of governance in which authority is not backed by force but, rather, by its own negation: the more she obeys the more authority she has. As such, it is not a vesting of authority resulting from Hobbesian fear but, rather, a vesting of authority within a political community that is, as Luis Lorenzano indicates, “a community of deliberations, decisions and responsibilities” (136) based on freedom *and* equality of speech. A similar point can be made about the Zapatista motto “we walk by asking,” which also makes explicit the Zapatistas’ negation of recipes and goals set in advance. In this sense, both principles—“command by obeying” and “we walk by asking”—can be regarded as an invitation to keep asking questions so as to continually create different forms of being, seeing, thinking and living that might recompose the current partition of the socio-political. What is ultimately at stake in the Zapatista uprising is, as was the case with the Cynics, the demand to both change the currency of the times and move beyond the sovereign relation.

A common spirit of resistance

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the Zapatistas no longer command a central position in political debates. Yet, as Thomas Nail convincingly shows in *Returning to Revolution*, their political and discursive practices have greatly influenced many recent activists, social movements and revolutionary activity. As I have attempted to show throughout this article, this influence is partly the result of

²⁰ For Khasnabish, the principle of “command by obeying” has its origin in indigenous practices. As he notes, “In the canyons and Lacandón Jungle of Chiapas, the Chol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Tojolabal Mayan migrants who had been practicing communal decision-making in a directly democratic way through community assemblies found their political practice further radicalized in light of the emerging politics of Zapatismo. In this setting, the community ruled while the authorities obeyed... This relationship exemplifies the key Zapatista democratic notion of ‘commanding obeying,’ as all authority and legitimacy in this case reside in the community and in the assembly rather than in military strongmen or political bosses” (*Zapatistas* 70).

the combination of two features present in Zapatista discourse, and specifically in Marcos' more literary writings. On the one hand, the Zapatistas' reappropriation of their own history and its resignification into fecund, living memory cautions against the dangers of extracting universal principles from particular circumstances and experiences, thereby making clear the need to reject ready-made recipes for revolution as well as teleological conceptualization of rebellion and resistance. On the other hand, the Zapatistas' ability to influence a wide array of recent social movements and revolutionary activity seems to suggest that despite their emphasis on the local and the particular, there are in fact certain Zapatista practices and attitudes that could extrinsically be read as universalizable and therefore relatable features. The Zapatistas' refusal to enter the sovereign relation; their conscious decision to abstain from assuming a position of knowledge and authority; their critique of the rules, habits and conventions of the time; their demand to change the way one lives and relates to others; their use of mockery and humor; and the fact that they themselves exemplify these features by the way they live gives cause for an extrinsic reading of Zapatismo as partaking in the long and marginalized tradition of Cynicism and courageous truth telling. To make it clear once again, I'm not implying the Zapatistas borrowed from or were directly influenced by Cynicism. To do so, as I already noted, risks "perpetuating a long legacy of Eurocentrism and theoretical imperialism" (Nail, 6). Instead, I'm suggesting that the possibility of reading Zapatismo along these lines has enabled a vast array of social movements and revolutionaries to partake in the political truth of Zapatismo, realize the importance of acting according to each group's fecund, living memory, and incorporate these insights into each group's particular circumstances. Even if this argument recognizes the problematic albeit seemingly unavoidable need to translate, as Acosta argues, "indigenous 'silence' into Western speech" (25), it also acknowledges the underlying spirit of resistance common to diverse oppositional practices and social movements.

In *The Uncomfortable Dead*, Elias Contreras ends up finding his Morales in a bar in San Cristóbal. He captures him and takes him to the Zapatista communities, where he is judged and sentenced to ten years of community work under the supervision of the Zapatista Juntas de Buen Gobierno. Morales' sentence does not isolate or exclude him from the community. It is, instead, an invitation to take part, to get involved, to include himself, to live differently. The decision to do so, however, will be entirely his. Something similar could be said of the Zapatista uprising and the Cynic tradition. They are, ultimately, invitations to change the currency of the times

and imagine a different world, one that does not yet exist but, if it is to come, would need to be constructed along the way.²¹

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