

AL FARO ZAPATISTA COLLECTION

Wars, Zapatismo, Networks

Xochitl Leyva Solano



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Radical Ecological Democracy

Searching for alternatives to unsustainable and inequitable model of 'development'

323.3097275

L179w

Wars, Zapatismo, Networks / Xochitl Leyva Solano. -- Buenos Aires, Argentina: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales; San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas: Cooperativa Editorial Retos; Guadalajara, Jalisco: Cátedra Jorge Alonso; Universidad de Guadalajara; Pune, India: Radical Ecological Democracy, 2022.

48 p.-- (The Zapatista Beacon Collection).

ISBN (Collection): 978-607-8800-58-2

ISBN: 978-607-8800-59-9

1. Neozapatista networks 2. War 3. Zapatista autonomy 4. Alterworldism 5. Sex-gender diversity
6. Anticapitalist movements 7. Journey for Life.

First digital edition: August, 2022

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English translator: Ann Holloway

Cover image: *Guerras y naufragios*, waterpaint by Paola Stefani

Collection, cover, and book design and interior layout: Sofía Carballo

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Radical Ecological Democracy - Full Circle Foundation

<<https://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/>>

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Hecho en Chiapas, México / *Made in Chiapas, Mexico*

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WARS, ZAPATISMO, NETWORKS

Xochitl Leyva Solano

This text performs a *sentipensar*¹ of the Zapatista movement and of *neozapatista networks* as fundamental for the emergence and growth of counter-hegemonic struggles from below and to the left, crucial for the globalization of hope and the creation of alternatives in the face of the ongoing projects of horror, death and wars. Which violence, which wars, which bodies? From a situated and embodied knowledge, I shall approach historically the fabric of networks, hopes, and struggles inspired by Zapatismo.

¹ The Spanish verb *sentipensar* is composed of the verbs “to feel” (*sentir*) and “to think” (*pensar*). It is both to think with feeling and feel with thinking, a way of sensing that does not separate thinking from feeling (Translator’s note).

Violence/War Against Women and Sexual Diversities

It was the 2nd of May 2021 when the vessel renamed *La Montaña* (The Mountain) set sail from Isla Mujeres (Quintana Roo, Mexico). On board was Squadron 421 of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, Zapatista Army of National Liberation), composed of four women, two men, and one *otroa*.² After 47 days of sailing across the Atlantic Ocean, the ship dropped anchor at the port of Baiona (Galicia, Spain). Those who had been organizing their arrival for months were already there, waiting for them. Local women wearing traditional Galician clothing were playing their bagpipes at the top of their lungs. Amongst shouts of *Zapata vive, la lucha sigue!* (Zapata lives, the struggle continues!), the Zapatistas disembarked on the 22nd of June in the fishing neighbourhood of Bouzas (Vigo). The boat of *compañeroa* Marijose stepped on the breakwater. She was followed by four Maya Zapatista women in traditional attire and face masks, while the Zapatista men stood at the back, supporting the feminine vital force and the force of the sex-gender diversity. A powerful message for the world. A powerful message for the indigenous people.

² Spanish nouns have grammatical gender. The suffix “-o” conventionally designates masculine nouns, while “-a” is used for feminine ones. Thus, the “otroa” employed by the Zapatistas conveys the word “other” with both masculine and feminine suffixes, in reference to non-binary persons. A similar case entails the use of “-x” instead of “-o” or “-a” (e.g. “compañerx”), which denotes masculine, feminine, or other non-binary gender identities (Translator’s note).

With the sky, sea, wind, and rocks as her witnesses and before a warm multitude, Marijose pronounced the following words:

On behalf of the women, children, men, elders, and *otroas* Zapatistas, I declare that the name of this land, which they now call 'Europe,' will henceforth be: SLUMIL K'AJXEMK'OP, which means 'Insubmissive Land.' And this is how it will be known by locals and strangers alike as long as there is someone here who will not give up, who will not sell out, and who will not give in.³

Symbolisms abound. The Zapatista body was occupying the overseas territory-land and renaming it on request, aware from collective historical experience of the power of naming the Other. However, this time the power was not used to subdue, dominate, or violate, but to grant continuity to the fabric of a common global struggle.

The words pronounced by the seven members of Squadron 421 resonated by virtue of the internet across the five continents but also in the metropolitan area of Vigo and neighbouring Baiona, converted by the capitalist industry of cultural tourism into what is called a "location of historical/artistic interest." Here, one can "consume" the 1st of March 1493 as a commodity-date, and Baiona is sold as the "first port of Europe to receive the news of the discovery of America," when *La Pinta*, one of the caravels of conqueror Christopher Columbus, docked in its waters.

³ Source: <<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=600474124261206>>, accessed on the 22nd of June 2021. Also see Cubells (2021).

Five hundred and twenty-eight years later, it is not the boot of Captain Martín Alonso Pinzón but the heeled boot of Marijose that resignifies history. Well, it is Marijose, Squadron 421, and the whole of Zapatismo collectively who, five hundred years since the fall of Tenochtitlan, stand up and pronounce in their own words in the land of the conquerors: “We were not conquered [...] We continue to resist and rebel” struggling from below and to the left against capitalism, patriarchy, and toxic masculinity; against what the Zapatistas have called the four wheels of capitalism: exploitation, dispossession, disdain, and repression.

The positioning of the *otroa* and the Zapatista women at the forefront was a collective decision that had been announced in a communiqué on the 17th of April 2021. On this, they asserted: “In what the late SupMarcos would have called a ‘black-stocking slap in the face of the hetero-patriarchal left,’ it has been decided that the first person to disembark will be *Marijose*.”⁴ From where I’m standing, this act of the Zapatistas contributes to making visible the wars against women, against diverse bodies and against the peoples in resistance. Like this, in this triad.

Let us take a moment to look at the figures; while they cannot thoroughly express all the horror of these wars, they can serve as a tip of the iceberg. In 2017, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime reported that 137 women were being murdered in the world every day; 58 out of every 100 women were murdered by their partners or relatives. Latin America ranks second after Africa in femicide rates: one every two

⁴ Source: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/04/20/421st-squadron/>>, accessed on the 7th of December 2021.

and a half hours. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), in 2018 El Salvador and Honduras presented the highest prevalence in murders of women, although Brazil and Mexico surpassed them in numbers.⁵

Today, capitalism attacks the social power of women with great brutality, and it does so for many reasons: because it needs to lower the cost of labour and it forces women to put in a lot of unpaid labour and reproduction, the need for women outside the house [*sic*]. It is a system that is structurally founded on the devalorization of the condition of women, and that is why it requires so much violence. This violence sends a message, namely, “beware, we know no limits.” The goal is to terrify an entire population, for women represent life, they represent reproduction (Federici 2018: n.p.).

The same author asserted that:

globalization in all its capitalist forms—structural adjustments, trade liberalization, low intensity warfare—is in essence a war against women, a war that is particularly devastating for women in the “Third World,” but undermines the livelihood and autonomy of proletarian women in every region of the world, including the “advanced” capitalist countries (Federici 2012: 86).

⁵ Source: <<https://ayudaenaccion.org/ong/blog/mujer/violencia-genero-cifras/>>, accessed on the 17th of August 2021.

On its part, Trans Murder Monitoring reported that, between 2008 and 2020, 3664 transexual persons were murdered around the world. The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (LGBTI) pointed out that 69 UN member states still criminalize consensual sex between adults of the same sex, and in 11 countries homosexual conduct is still punishable by death.⁶ The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported in 2015 on the lethal and non-lethal violence directed against LGBTI persons, which included the violation of the right to life, acts of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, excessive use of force, illegal and arbitrary detention.⁷

With this global overview in mind, let us focus on the concrete reality of Chiapas. An increasing production of activist videos⁸ and academic articles by young native researchers, who describe the situation of violence, rejection, and vulnerability that indigenous young people face when they do not fit into the gender binary of heterosexual man/woman. As a reference point, I will quote an article that studies this issue in a Maya Tzeltal community in the municipality of Ocosingo. Its authors describe the discrimination and physical and verbal violence suffered by these young people at home, at secondary school, and in the community,

⁶ Source: <<https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/blog/historia/articulo/asesinatos-colectivo-lgbti/>>, accessed on the 2nd of August 2021.

⁷ Accessed at <<http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/ViolenciaPersonasLGBTI.pdf>>, on the 2nd of August 2021.

⁸ See video online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iExavc-vdcFs>>, accessed on the 29th of August 2021.

inflicted by (male) heads of households, teachers, classmates, and evangelical pastors. When interviewed, certain heads of family expressed that “before, there were no” *antsiwiniketik*, that it was the “people from the outside who put these ideas into the young people’s heads” and that the *antsiwiniketik* are “a danger to the community” (Hernández, Marcial, and Moreno 2020: 130).

The researchers translate the term *antsiwinik* as “a person who can pose as a man and a woman at the same time” and add that, although it is only applied to men, it is not synonymous to being a homosexual, for it carries different cultural connotations.⁹ However, in this context, the young people are viewed as “men women.” The impact of the violence inflicted upon the *antsiwiniketik* is devastating: low self-esteem, worry, anger, fear, and, of course, poor school performance, as well as a will to abandon the community when they have not been already expelled from it. The authors of the article conclude with a strong criticism of the high school where they conducted their research from 2016 to 2018. They assert that the school does not acknowledge the issue of homosexuality and does not address it adequately, despite the fact that it is grounded on an intercultural approach that formally prioritizes diversity (Hernández, Marcial and Moreno 2020).

To this we counterpose various fragments of the Zapatista ways. Let us begin with a segment from the released profile of Marijose: “39 years old. Tojolabal from the border

⁹ Sylvia Marcos (2021: n.p.) asserts on the Zapatista concept of *otroa* “that it cannot be included in that of transgender due to the ancestral significance in which it is framed.”

forest zone. She is fluent in Spanish. She can read and write. She has been a militia member (*milicianoa*), health promoter (*promotora*), education promoter and trainer...¹⁰ From the onset, we can see that her sex-gender identity has not been a motive of exclusion from the militia and from the grassroots social organizational structure which includes the positions of *promotora* that she has occupied. A new crack is opened; the previous one was opened when Mayor Ana Maria explained in 1994:

We demanded from the *compañeros* of our villages that women organize as well, represent something, do something, not only the men. For whenever we arrived at the communities there were only men at the meetings and in the study circles. We worked a lot so that women would stand up and have the opportunity to do something; they themselves were asking for it. They would say: “if men can study and learn things, why should we not?” We also want to train, to learn something [...] Furthermore, we have insurgent *compañeras* who have proven that they can; yes, we women can, give us the opportunity. That is how many women began to enter the militia (Mayor Ana María [1994] 2002: 110).

The respect shown to the women of the support bases and their inclusion in all spheres of life and struggle was not the idea of one person, one family, or one secondary school; it has been a priority for the Zapatista movement as a whole. All one has to do is listen to the women in the

¹⁰ Accessed at <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/04/20/421st-squadron/>>, on the 9th of August 2021.

different meetings that have been called or read their words, as registered in the written and audiovisual media, where they narrate in detail their situation “before” and “after” joining the EZLN. They describe how their rights came to be, the difficulties they face, and what remains to be accomplished. In the same sense, we could/would imagine that the existence of Marijose and the fact that she is part of this movement has a similar—but different—cascade effect to that of the Zapatista militiawomen on the women from the support bases. The Zapatista women today, 28 years after the declaration of the Women’s Revolutionary Law, participate on equal terms in the regular militia forces and the general command, as well as in the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Councils of Good Government), the committees, and the commissions that make up the different levels of autonomous organization.

Marijose should not be reduced to “a mere media strategy,” as someone contemptuously claimed. On the contrary, she is part of something deeper, as Sylvia Marcos points out (2021) when referring to the lived ancestrality of the Zapatista *otroa*. And to this I might add another element, which has been present for years in the underground of present-day Mexico where the Zapatistas connect with the sex workers and the diverse bodies of the members of groups such as the *Brigada Callejera* (Street Brigade) and the Mexican Network of Sex Work. As the late *Subcomandante Insurgente* Marcos asserted, he got to know about them through their work in the Zapatista communities in resistance. Later, he met them in person in La Merced, a popular neighbourhood in Mexico City, during the visit of a Zapatista delegation in the context of the *Otra Cam-*

paña (Other Campaign). The Zapatista delegates listened to them narrate in their own voices “the testimonies of injustice, discrimination, persecution, and repression of homosexuals, lesbians, transgender persons, and of the different colours that paint the sexual differences [...] the stories of razzias, extorsions, beatings, evictions, murders.” There was pain, but there was also struggle, resistance, dignity, “the other bridge that unites those who are below in mutual communication” (SCI Marcos 2006: xvii-xviii).

All this occurred in the context of the sixth political initiative launched by the Zapatistas. An initiative called the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Forest, announced in June 2005. Its national concretion became known as *La Otra Campaña*, as opposed to the ongoing presidential campaign and the classist forms of political party rule. The *Otra Campaña* was a call to do politics differently, to give a voice and an ear to those in Mexico who are below, to launch a national programme of anticapitalist struggle and draw a new constitution. In this context, the Mexican Network of Sex Work—supporter of the Sixth Declaration—worked at the grassroots level in assemblies to contribute to creating this new programme, including a constitution of anticapitalist character. They agreed on demanding the eradication of the structural causes of the sex trade, but they did not consider the abolition of prostitution; on the contrary, they demanded better conditions for sex workers, as well as the defence of their income and labour achievements.¹¹

¹¹ Source: <<https://en.calameo.com/read/000137394d82f8109b5ea>> accessed on the 2nd of August 2021.

However, this national fabric was not disjointed from the Zapatista communities. In the rebel Zapatista autonomous municipalities (MAREZ), members of this and other collectives, as well as of different networks, held workshops and courses for the Zapatista promoters—at the request of the autonomous authorities themselves—on health in general, and on sexual and reproductive health, understood as a “practice of freedom and not an imposition or prohibition.” The workshops, courses, and manuals that have been co-produced with the Zapatista communities discuss the issue of sex workers and of respect for homosexuals, lesbians, bisexual, and transgender persons as part of the real and concrete challenge of building other possible worlds here and now that include sex-gender diversities. As the participants in these workshops—both tutors and tutees—have pointed out, it has not been easy, for there are many different “barriers” to overcome.¹²

I would like to close this first section by emphasizing that in the everyday, integral, and territorial construction of Zapatista autonomy, as well as in the political fabric of its (inter)national networks, the issue of sex-gender diversities has held a place and a meaning in what—as we shall see in the third section—the Zapatistas early on called **the war against humanity**.

¹² For a more in-depth account, see the book co-created by the Zapatista communities and the *Brigada Callejera* (Madrid, Montejo and Madrid 2006), as well as the thesis of Alma Padilla (2018).



Disembarkation in Vigo. Source: <https://pozol.org/?attachment_id=19084>, accessed on the 24th of June 2021.

The *Travesía por La Vida* (Journey for Life) in the Face of the Collapse of Civilization

On the 16th of March 2020, the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee—General Command of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (CCRI-CG EZLN)

1. Announced the closure of the Caracoles and of the Centres of Resistance and Rebellion
2. Decreed a red alert in Zapatista territories.
3. Recommended that we should not forfeit human contact, but rather temporarily change the ways in which we relate to each other.
4. Recommended following the hygiene measures shared by the EZLN in its communities, villages, and neighbourhoods.
5. It called on the people to not abandon the ongoing struggles:
 - Against femicide and violence against women.
 - In defence of territory and of Mother Earth.
 - For the disappeared, murdered, and incarcerated.
 - To continue the struggle for humanity.
6. All this as part of what Zapatismo and the National Indigenous Congress called “the struggle for life.”¹³

What was the context of the Zapatista communiqué?
On the 27th of February 2020, the Mexican Undersecretary

¹³ Source: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2020/03/17/ezln-closes-caracoles-due-to-coronavirus-and-calls-on-people-not-to-abandon-current-struggles/>>, accessed on the 12th of December 2021.

of Prevention and Health Promotion informed of the first person to be hospitalized and diagnosed with Covid-19 by laboratory analysis. On the 11th of March, the World Health Organisation (WHO) characterized this virus as a pandemic, after 118,000 cases had been reported in 114 countries, leading to 4,291 deaths.¹⁴ Five days later, in a pioneering act from an autonomous indigenous peasant organisation, the EZLN issued its timely communiqué, not only for its support bases but also for the entire planet. The accurate and expedited character of this action was ratified when, two days later, on the 18th of March, the Mexican Health Secretary announced the first death due to Covid-19. Eight days later, on the 24th of March and following the detection of the first “local” contagions and 7 deaths, the Mexican government launched phase 2 of its sanitary emergency plan.

Let us take a closer look at the content of the Zapatista communiqué. From early on it invited us to consider Covid-19 as a “wager, a possibility, an opportunity” to continue the fight for life. In prompting us to not lose human contact, it opposed living the government measures of “National Healthy Distancing Day” or “Stay at Home” as total isolation or, even worst, as the paralysation of ongoing struggles. Before a world in shock, overwhelmed by confusion, disbelief, conspiracy theories, and uncertainty, the calling of the Zapatistas to not lose our way and to **find new forms** of continuing the struggle was fundamental

¹⁴ Source: <<https://www.paho.org/en/news/11-3-2020-who-characterizes-covid-19-pandemic>>, accessed on the 20th of June 2020.

and inspiring for many people in Chiapas, Mexico, and the world.

How profound these new forms were going to be was revealed to us by their ensuing actions. As of the 5th of October 2020, the Zapatistas began to publish a series of communiqués, sharing elements of how they had dealt with the pandemic. They described doing it through community and territorial organization, measures of prevention, and scientific support in solidarity. They asserted that, by that time, a total of 12 Zapatistas had died of Covid-19. In that same month, the Director-General of the WHO—in reference mostly to the reality in the countries of the Global North—asserted that the world was going through a “critical moment in the pandemic,” with 40,890,712 cases and 1,126,351 deaths.¹⁵ The Zapatistas also watched and listened to what was going on in the world and, in a profound criticism of the ongoing systems of death, they exposed “the criminal reality of femicides,” “nature lying on its death bed,” capital in a hurry to put consumers back on the streets again, the power of the “powerful hiding within the fortress-nation-states,” the enclosure and the attacks of the wars under way, and of death. However, the Zapatistas also watched and listened to the resistances and the uprisings, which they called “vital indicators of a humanity that refuses to follow the system’s hurried pace toward collapse.” Indicators that show us that “the solutions may be found below [...] Not in the halls of government.

¹⁵ Source: <<https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/coronavirus-covid-19-23-octubre-2020>>, accessed on the 10th of July of 2021.

Not in the offices of large corporations.” Resistances and uprisings that insist on struggling for life.

After this global evaluation, the Zapatistas shared an announcement they had collectively agreed upon: “We are Zapatistas, we are the carriers of the virus of resistance and rebellion. As such, we shall travel to the 5 continents.”

We shall find that which makes us equal. Not only the humanity that animates our different skins, our different ways, our different languages and colours. It is also, and above all, the common dream that we share as a species [...] the search for freedom.

We were informed straight away that their first destination would be the European continent. The Zapatistas asserted on that 5th of October 2020 that:

We are thinking about the fraternal embrace of people from our own country and around the world that we have received throughout these years. We think that if life here resists and even flourishes, against all odds, it is thanks to all those people who challenged distances, red tape, borders, and differences of language and culture. We want to thank them: the men, women, and others—but above all the women—who confronted and defeated calendars and geographies to be with us [...] and we also think that now is the time in which we Zapatistas [*nosotras, nosotros, nosotros*] reciprocate the listening ear, words, and presence of those worlds [...] In the face of the

destruction of the planet, a mountain sailing through the small hours of the morning.¹⁶

¹⁶ Source: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2020/10/07/part-six-a-mountain-on-the-high-seas/>>, accessed on the 12th of December 2021.



Squadron 421. Zapatista maritime delegation. Source: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/04/20/421st-squadron/>>, accessed on the 17th of April 2021.

Alter- and Anti-Networks Amidst the War

This “fraternal embrace” from the people of the world and of our own country to Zapatismo led me to speak in the mid-1990s of the *neozapatista networks*. It was not a cold, distant political and academic concept, one delivered from the ivory tower of knowledge/power. On the contrary, it emerged from a reflection that was both thought and felt, from personal-collective practice: Since the first days of January 1994, we had organized together with members of local political groups a caravan to the communities of the South of San Cristobal de Las Casas, to verify and denounce the rockets launched on civilians; then came my/our first participation in the Peace Belts around the Cathedral; the coordination of the rapporteurship committee in the National Democratic Convention; the collective work performed by us, the local civil society, to arm “the campaign” of the Insurgent Governor; and, in between, with other *compañerxs* from non-governmental organizations, the thrust to form two fronts of independent peasant organizations which, at that moment, were supporting the Zapatista demands. And then to share the Zapatista message in various countries of Central Europe.

However, do not think that I was exceptional. No! There were many others who, just like me, were partaking in thousands of activities of solidarity, support, and fraternization (*hermanamiento*) with the Zapatistas. The diversity in class, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and age of those who identified with Zapatismo was and is impressive and broke (breaks) the old patterns of class or identity in traditional left-wing militant groups. In fact, a significant number of

us entered the field of politics for the first time in response to the Zapatista invitation to do a different kind of politics.

All this multifarious and prismatic solidarity/fraternization/support took place amidst a peace dialogue conducted with the Mexican government, which was at the same time deploying a violent counter-insurgent war. This is the context in which the EZLN advanced, in which the NGOs and the local, national and international *solidarixs* operated. The NGOs denounced executions and rapes committed in Ocosingo by members of the Mexican armed forces. They sent reports to international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States and, at the same time, put political pressure on individual actors such as members of the US Congress or the European Parliament. They were the first voices to demand, along with the relatives of the victims, that light be shed on the Acteal Massacre and that the material and intellectual perpetrators be punished. As a result, these organizations multiplied the access channels of the Zapatistas to the world system. The members of the *neozapatista internationalist networks* also played an important role in this, emerging rebelliously on the five continents, though, at the beginning, mostly in the United States and Europe.

European Neozapatista Networks

The internationalists who stood in solidarity with the Zapatistas were organized in multiple ways: “Zapatista collectives,” “solidarity committees,” “solidarity coalitions,” “support groups,” “committees,” “solidarity networks,” “action networks,” and/or “continental networks.” They launched

caravans, meetings, fora, fraternizations, festivals, Aguascalientes and Caracoles overseas, to name but a few. They, and we, the local *solidarias*, used the internet as a way of staying connected. However, the internet was not the only channel of communication, for many internationalists also visited the so-called conflict zone as peace campers, observers, or promoters of a specific project in the Zapatista communities. This presence—as mentioned in the communiqué of the 5th of October 2020—often brought a flow of external support to the autonomous municipality, strengthening the de facto Zapatista autonomy. Given that the federal, state, and local governments, as well as antizapatista and paramilitary groups, were conducting all sorts of maneuvers in Chiapas to negate the existence of the autonomous rebel municipalities or to dismantle them, the presence, contributions, and links of the local, national, and internationalist *solidarixs* acquired strategic importance, not only in the advance of the EZLN in the Gramscian *war of position* fought against the Mexican government, but also in the physical survival of the Zapatistas and of their project of glocal anticapitalist autonomy.

The local and internationalist *solidarixs* agreed on the importance of direct actions of protest in Mexican embassies and of spreading information, which we did at the beginning, using faxes and the incipient internet service that we had at our disposal. Later on, as the so-called social networks developed, we began to use Facebook, Youtube, Whatsapp, Blogs, Instagram, etc. From this perspective, the neozapatista networks have been social-organizational and communicational fabrics of insurgence and resistance, both virtual and physical. In fact, my calling them a network is

not based on any academic theory but rather on the discussions between us local and internationalist *solidarixs*: thus, in 1996, those attending the First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism proposed the launching of a “**collective network** of struggles and resistances”. Three years later, during the Second European Encounter of Zapatista Collectives—held in Europe—we talked of the need for the “**network** to have a minimum articulation so as to launch common strategies of struggle.” At the same time, the idea of an exclusive cybernetic network was rejected and the need to meet face-to-face from time to time was considered a priority, while we also debated on the dangers of the nascent network becoming centralized.

In 1999, the rebellious heart of the Zapatistas was beating in many overseas geographies: in the Swiss Alps, for example, there were prozapatista collectives made up of workers, students, and peasants fighting against transnational corporations such as Coca Cola. Another collective located on the largest island in front of the tip of the Italian “boot” was working in favour of the Zapatistas and, at the same time, to tackle the problems of migration, marginalization, and poverty facing the south of Italy. The Danish collectives acted both in favour of the Zapatista struggle and of Kurdistan. In the south of Spain, on the mountainside of the Sierra Nevada, solidarity with the Zapatistas was embedded in the spiritual commune of an autonomous cultural centre located in a squat. In the so-called City of Light, the movement that identified itself as M.A.R. was prozapatista and also part of the struggle against neoliberalism. We never got to know what the acronym stood for,

only that they were positioned in the most radical extreme of the Parisian left. However, in that same city, a colourist working at a design company, the daughter of a Colombian immigrant who worked as cleaner, was also prozapatista.

Day by day, the number of those standing in solidarity with Zapatismo grew. In the southwest of England, where the river Avon runs, members of an alternative autonomous community house turned Zapatismo into a point of convergence for people formerly in solidarity with Central America and for members of a football club who have become politicized through the problems of racism and immigration in England. In the capital of Spain, the anarchosyndicalists of the General Labour Confederation (CNT), libertarians *par excellence*, saw in Zapatismo the possibility to advance the idea of a broader internationalist front and revitalize their own organization. At the southern tip of vast Lake Geneva, a young Swiss, member of a Zapatista collective who lived as a rebel, artisan and squatter, rejected the advance of capitalism as a whole and, more specifically, the way of life of his own wealthy family. Similarly, in a village in the Vallés Oriental region, a collective in support of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas included in its ranks a thriving businesswoman of the furniture industry who stood in solidarity with the resisting Zapatista communities and saw them as reflecting the Catalan resistance and autonomy that she brandished. In the neighbouring village, the prozapatistas began as a movement of solidarity with Nicaragua, which they were now extending to Kosovo and Chiapas.

In the northern part of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the central Apennines, the Italian prozapatista collectives were

constituted by anarchists, grassroots Catholics and local industrialists. An organization of great importance in solidarity with Zapatismo has been the Ya Basta! Association, also based in Italy. In 1999, it defined itself as a network of ten centres in different cities and villages of the country. In the pamphlets they shared with us they also mentioned working closely with collectives from the Italian-Swiss border. The members of this organization originated from the experience of the Social Centres, they identified with the Zapatista struggle against neoliberalism, and supported what they called “the projects of the Italian Zapatista movement.”¹⁷ In their own words, these projects consisted in protesting against unemployment and social exclusion in Europe, demanding a universal income for all citizens and open borders in Europe, rallying against the G8 summits and censorship in the Italian press, calling for the closure of the Italian “prison camps” for the undocumented, protesting against the mafia system that runs clandestine migration with no consideration for the inhuman conditions suffered by immigrants, demanding respect for human rights in Kurdistan, protesting against the sale of arms to Turkey and against the attack of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on Yugoslavia.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Associazione Ya Basta! (1999).

¹⁸ See Associazione Ya Basta! (1999).

Neozapatista Networks and the Alterglobalization Movement

The seed of autonomy and the resistance of the Zapatista indigenous peasants was spreading in numerous and diverse territories. It would be impossible to mention each and every one of them here, but let me mention what happened between the 29th of November and the 3rd of December 1999, when the Zapatista influence on the world became crystal clear in what would later be known as the global movement for justice or *alterglobalization movement*. For the first time, in Seattle (USA), trade unionists, environmentalists, students, anarchists, feminists, pacifists, human rights defenders, and Native Americans massively marched and protested together, joined by activists from other countries of both the “First World” and the wrongly called “Third World.”

Many of them had already been in Chiapas, in the Zapatista autonomous municipalities; they had created networks of solidarity with the rebels, they read, translated and distributed their communiqués, and supported the Zapatista autonomist projects. Many had arrived in Chiapas as prozapatista activists and, at the same time, enrolled in our or other study centres as undergraduate and postgraduate students. I recall, for example, a young Japanese girl who would later coordinate the first translation of the writings of *Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos* in her country. Hundreds more came, all strongly committed to spreading the Zapatista cause, and together we managed to impel it all the way to the Arctic Polar Circle, Patagonia, Australia, East Africa. At the same time, we created

collectives and networks outside and within our workplace. Between 2006 and 2012, in the times of the *Otra Campaña*, I was part of nine collective spaces simultaneously. It was madness, a frenetic madness that re-enchanted our lives. It made us embody the other politics, the other history, the other education. In fact, that was the name of one of the nine collectives of which I was part. It brought together a Belgian anarcho-punk rocker, students, and university professors of different ages from Chiapas and Oaxaca.

But let us return to 1999. The protesters took to the streets of Seattle *en masse* to demonstrate in front of the World Trade Organization (WTO) against the negative impact of free trade and its deregulating measures, as well as against the loss of employment and the precarization of labour in the so-called First World. US grassroots activists for environmental justice and veterans of the movement against the war in Vietnam converged in confirming the enormous impact of Zapatismo in “launching” and “spreading” the US movement against the North American Free Trade Agreement and, afterwards, against the WTO, as well as its powerful influence in the “horizontal, no-leadership style of street movements” of that time.¹⁹

IT Guerrilla, Network War, War Against Humanity

Zapatismo impacted the spheres of everyday life, academia, Mexican and US intelligence agencies, to name but a few. Regarding the former, allow me to clarify. Between the

¹⁹ Source: <<https://www.jornada.com.mx/2004/01/02/per-jim.html>>, accessed on the 1st of August 2004.

mid-1990s and the end of the 20th century, when I travelled to Yucatan in my car—with Chiapas license plates—the road traffic police treated me with great deference and respect. They would come up to me and ask: How are things in Chiapas? How is *Comandanta Ramona*? What news from *Subcomandante Marcos*? As for academia, I could literally mention thousands of works in dozens of languages that speak of the impact of Zapatismo on the methodologies, epistemologies, and theories of social sciences. I have referred to this in other texts. In this essay, I would like to mention the work of the son of the Spanish autonomous community Castilla-La Mancha, Manuel Castells, who in 1997 highlighted the novelty of Zapatismo claiming that the EZLN was the first IT guerrilla movement, perceiving it as a “revolutionary cell” that was built on the flow of electrons and that struggles against the consequences of exclusion from economic modernization but also challenges the inevitability of a new geopolitical order in which capitalism becomes universally accepted (Castells 1997). He named this new world order the *Era of Information* and the *Network Society*.

It originated in the historical coincidence, around the late 1960s and mid-1970s, of three *independent* processes: the information technology revolution; the economic crisis of both capitalism and statism, and their subsequent restructuring; and the blooming of cultural social movements, such as libertarianism, human rights, feminism, and environmentalism. The interaction between these processes, and the reactions they triggered, brought into being a new dominant social structure, the network society; a new economy, the informational

/global economy; and a new culture, the culture of real virtuality. The logic embedded in this economy, this society, and this culture underlies social action and institutions throughout an interdependent world (Castells 2010 [1998]: 372).

In this context, Castells stressed that, to spread its message to the world, the Zapatista movement required both the internet and what he called “a global network of solidarity groups.” In other words, the new communication technologies were playing a crucial role as an organizational infrastructure of the Zapatista movement, together with the principle of the authenticity of their own identity, based on their cultural specificity and the desire to control their own destiny. The ideas deployed by Castells did not remain enclosed within academia but were taken up by researchers belonging to the so-called think tanks that work for the US Department of Defence. Those analysts sought to understand how and why a “local” movement had global repercussions, and they put this knowledge at the service of the Pentagon. They coined the concept of *netwar* and, particularly, *the Zapatista social netwar* (Ronfeldt *et al.* 1998).

Zapatismo was contributing to the emergence of other forms of understanding conflict in the new world order. However, the aforementioned analysts were moving on dangerous ground, linking the spheres of intelligence, the military, and academia to steer the actions of the Mexican government and the US empire in what they called “the Chiapas conflict.” On its part, the Mexican government deployed a strategy of counterinsurgency in the form of low-intensity warfare and counter-attacking the Zapatista

social network, from a national security perspective subordinate to the US doctrine of national security.²⁰ That made (and continues to make) the EZLN and its supporters in solidarity and sympathizers the target of the social, political, psychological, and military attacks launched by the government military and paramilitary forces.

The think tanks, the military, the governments, politicians, and scholars had their theories and acted accordingly. However, what neither the world nor mainstream academia were used to see was an indigenous, rural, political-military movement producing its own theory; a theory that spread rapidly through the veins of the world, inspiring glocal anti-, and alter- *praxis*. Let us take a closer look at 1997, the year of publication of one of the three volumes of Castell's work. It is also the year when Zapatismo articulated one of the most comprehensive and thorough political analysis on the state of the world. It was a theorizing that was ahead of its time and ahead of events to come.²¹ What *Subcomandante Insurgente* Marcos said then is commonly heard today, in 2021, in spaces of radical critical thought; however, no left-wing party or movement in Mexico adopted such a viewpoint in 1997. Even less so did they accompany such a perspective with the collective creation of rebel

²⁰ For a more detailed analysis, see Juan Manuel Sandoval (2001).

²¹ This we asserted in 2015 (Köhler and Leyva 2015). In 2017 Sergio Rodríguez Lascano published a compilation of the texts of *Subcomandante Insurgente* Marcos on political economy and war. He pointed out that Zapatismo was reclaiming an abandoned tradition that had characterized the great analyses of the mid-19th and beginning of the 20th century.

municipalities from below. As of the end of 1994, these began to build a de facto autonomy, challenging Mexican federalism, socio-politically countering the military and paramilitary occupation of Chiapas, and dislocating the neoliberal economic principle of maximizing profit.

Zapatismo asserted then that “modern globalization” and “neoliberalism” should be understood above all as a **new war** waged to conquer people, territories, nation-states. It called it *World War IV*, perceiving the Cold War as World War III. The fourth was described as “the worst and cruellest” of all wars, for it was being fought “in all places and by all means **against humanity**.” *Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos* identified its modus operandi: on the one hand, destruction/depopulation; on the other, reconstruction/re-ordering. While noting that the “neoliberal jigsaw puzzle” had many pieces, he postulated seven:

The first is the double accumulation, of wealth and poverty, at the two poles of global society. The other is the total exploitation of the totality of the world. The third is the nightmare of the migrant part of humanity. The fourth is the nauseating relationship between crime and Power. The fifth is the violence of the state. The sixth is the mystery of megapolitics. The seventh are the multi-form pockets of resistance of humanity against neoliberalism. (SCI Marcos 1997 n.p.).

Already since its First Declaration of the Lacandon Forest, the EZLN affirmed that “the dictators have been applying an undeclared *genocidal war* against our people for many

years.”²² A war that could be traced back to the times of conquest and colonization. At this point let me point out that, indeed, all these ways of naming emerged from the reality of what was being experienced in the Zapatista territories: the dismantlement of the rebel municipalities, the police and military occupation, the proliferation of paramilitary groups, the Acteal Massacre, the stigmatization and expulsion of foreign *solidarixs*, the implementation of counterinsurgent social policies, attacks against the Bishop of the diocese of San Cristóbal and against local NGOs, etc. However, while this local context may explain the emergence of this perspective, it was the crescendo of violence, horror, war, death, femicide, inequality in the world that led us to slowly intertwine, team up, and converge in what is nowadays being called the *struggle for life*.

This narration is only one piece of the long, complex, both painful and luminous collective history that occurred amidst the wars. This history could maybe help us to better understand how, when, and why old and new waves of sympathizers and *solidarixs* in “Insubmissive Europe” are organizing from below and to the left, embracing and receiving the Zapatistas as part of a global struggle that assumes a shape of its own at different times and in different geographies.

²² Source: <<https://radiozapatista.org/?p=20280&lang=en>>, accessed on the 13th of December 2021.



Lukas Avendaño and Zapatista support bases in performance “Requiem for a dikkop.” Dance festival “Báilate Otro Mundo,” Caracol Jacinto Canek, Chiapas, 2019. Photo: Francisco De Parres Gómez.

To Start Over

I would not like to close this text giving a wrong idea of the neozapatista networks or leaving readers to think that we are talking about an earthly paradise. Anyone who has ventured into the creation of a de facto and unauthorized autonomy knows how many setbacks, difficulties, and challenges one must face at the personal and collective level at any given moment. That is why it is no coincidence that, in the midst of the reception of Squadron 421 in Vigo, a group of participants in the Galician Assembly denounced what they called “the implicit violence against migrants and/or racialized persons.” They took the microphone to express:

that our experiences and judgments be put on trial, that our experiences be delegitimized and our voices not heard is something that has been normalized for the past 500 years, and we shall no longer consent to it, not now, not ever [...] We want to highlight that in this space there is no decolonial and/or antiracist axis, and we cannot spend energy and wear ourselves out emotionally in giving out free lessons (quoted in Cubells 2021: n.p.).²³

Aware of the difficulties that exist within our collectives, networks and movements, when the Zapatistas called us to participate in the First International Gathering of Politics, Arts, Sports and Culture... to be held on the 8th of March

²³ There was also tension between members of the non-binary community and cisgender women in the meeting “Many struggles to live, one same heart to struggle,” see Oropeza (2021).

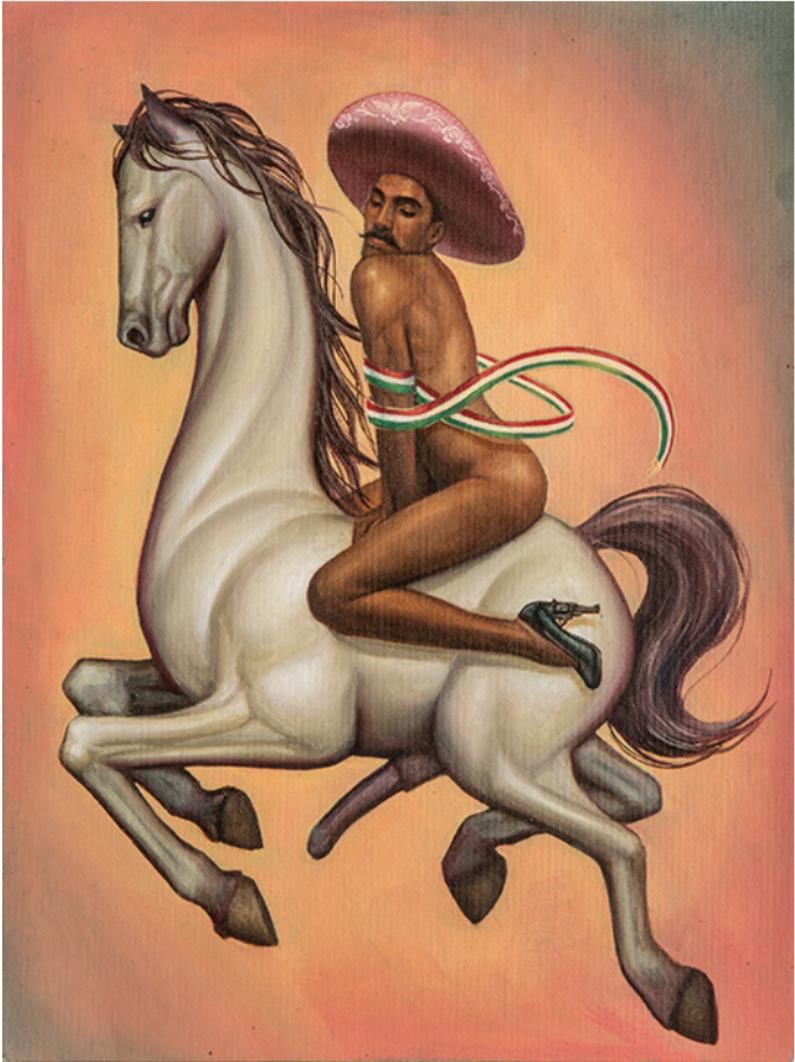
2019 in their Caracol, they did it in an inclusive way through what they called “women who struggle.” That included us all, regardless of our race, sex-gender diversity, age, social class, and place of origin. We were all there: women of the colour of the Earth, black and white, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, darkwave, activist, cybernauts and peasants, catechists and women of faith from below, women in a precarious situation, university students, teachers, daughters with their mothers, leaders, human rights defenders, musicians, theatre women, clowns, dancers, sculptors, photographers, painters. We were all standing up to face the capitalist, sexist, heteropatriarchal, and racist dispossession that we experience every day.

The power of this gathering can be explained in many different ways, but one will suffice: the Zapatista pathway has been cleared amidst a “rotation,” a “shift,” not only in the role and the function of the feminine or feminized bodies in wars, but also in the overall model of war. These are what Rita Segato (2016: 59) calls the “**new forms of war**”:

domination and sexual predation are no longer complements of war, as they used to be, collateral damages; they now occupy a central position as a weapon of war that produces cruelty and lethality within a form of damage that is, at the same time, material and moral.

This damage operates as a *pedagogy of cruelty* (ibid.: 79) and is expressed in a thousand forms of violence against women, different bodies, Mother Earth, and the people.

However, accompanying and listening to the Zapatista women and *otroas* and to all women and different bodies



Fabián Cháirez, *La Revolución*, oil on canvas, 2014. Source: <<https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2020/04/the-pin-up-revolutionary/?fbclid=IwAR2RldH-CSNpARb4jwAqMLioD8S02Th0xANraHcDyvEvJM36xWnYU-9vZ>>.

in struggle I have learnt something more. I have learnt to think and to act in the context of **wars**, in plural and in feminine.²⁴ This is not a simple semantic twist; on the contrary, it has meant distancing myself from abstract masculinity and logocentrism and opening up to *sentipensar* (feel-think) other ongoing wars:²⁵ epistemic-theoretical-political wars, energy-spiritual wars, wars within families, wars within feminisms, wars within the left, cyberwars, wars of figures, wars of domination of men (from below and from above) over women from below, as the rappers from the Batallones Femeninos collective point out, denouncing from Ciudad Juarez the violence against women and the femicides.

Zapatismo and the neozapatista networks have allowed me not only to attempt to face all these wars/violences, but also to re-enchant my life with rays of hope. When, for decades, I have seen the Zapatistas go forward, start again, set sail, all I can think is how lucky I am to be able to learn from them and replenish my life today with dignified and rebellious autonomy side by side with the Maya Tseltal women and young people of the Yutsilal Bahlumilal Pluriversity. A space that would have been inconceivable without the Zapatista uprising of the 1st of January 1994, without everything they have created all these decades, all these centuries...

²⁴ “War” in Spanish is feminine (as mentioned in the previous note, Spanish nouns have grammatical gender) (Translator’s note).

²⁵ See Leyva (2019).

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About the Collection

The *Al Faro Zapatista* Collection is a tribute to Zapatista women, children, elders, *otroas*, and men in their more than 500 years of resistance and almost 28 years of rebellious public life. The initiative seeks to join the Journey for Life. We do it from what we are: social science workers, activated activists.

We do it because Zapatismo has been the beacon for many of us and other inhabitants of planet Earth, the lighthouse in the middle of The Storm caused by what, in 2017, the Zapatista women named the “machista and patriarchal capitalist system,” fueled by racism and “cis-heteronormativity,” as the sexual diversities in motion and re-existence call it.

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Planet Earth, 2022

Wars, Zapatismo, Networks
was digitized at Tipobyte estudio editorial,
in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, México,
on August 2022.

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This book feels-thinks the Zapatista movement and *neozapatista networks* as fundamental to the emergence and development of counter-hegemonic struggles from below and to the left, which are essential for the globalization of hope and the creation of alternatives in the face of the projects of horror, death, and wars underway. I wonder: Which violences? Which wars? Which bodies? At the same time, from a situated and embodied knowledge, I approach historically the fabric of networks, hopes, and struggles inspired by Zapatismo.

ISBN 978-607-8800-59-9



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