‘A World Where Many Worlds Fit’: On the Zapatista Model of a Just Society

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“‘We cannot save ourselves alone,’ say the Zapatistas, and they repeat: ‘No one can.’” (Eduardo Galeano 2000: 11)[2]

1 Introduction: An Indigenous (revolutionary) method to pursue justice

The aim of this essay is to examine the components of the conception of justice (Rawls 1999: 3-6) put forth by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) following their uprising in Mexico on January 1st, 1994. The Zapatista conception of justice is *critical* in the broadest sense of this term, that is, it strives to explain and evaluate, in their historical specificity, social structures (and their accompanying ideologies). It does so through an analytical and conceptual framework within which current manifestations of social injustice are exposed and denounced, while outlining paths for emancipatory political action (Horkheimer 1968b, Subcomandante Galeano 2015a, 2015b, and 2015c). This essay will prove that such a critical conception of justice has resulted in a distinctively egalitarian model of a just society (Held 2006: 6) grounded on political and cultural pluralism. To accomplish this, it is necessary to contextualise the EZLN as a political movement that, while deeply rooted in the history and culture of Indigenous communities in Mexico, also developed an original corpus of political philosophy.[3] This corpus – scattered across

hundreds of political declarations, communiqués, letters, and stories –, in turn, has consistently substantiated and inspired Zapatista political practices.

According to the spokesperson of the EZLN, Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano (2015a) – known as Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos between 1994 and 2014, and then again from October 2023 onward[4] –, the Zapatista conception of justice is rooted in a method of political reflection and action built on three distinct components. The first component is referred to as 'genealogy,' which the Zapatistas conceive in Foucauldian terms, that is, as the study of history aimed at unravelling 'how things were before, what follows, and what changes' (Subcomandante Galeano 2015a: 27). This genealogical understanding of continuity and transformation requires the second component, that is, the utilisation of 'concepts, theories, sciences' (Subcomandante Galeano 2015a: 28) that not only elucidate 'what is observed on the horizon' (or the world itself), but also encompass 'the gaze that we embody' (or who we are) (Subcomandante Galeano 2015a: 27). Lastly, the third component requires 'critical thinking' to ascertain 'the usefulness of these concepts' for fully understanding history, as well as for defining paths for political action informed by such an understanding (Subcomandante Galeano 2015a: 28).

Genealogy has been indeed essential to the structuring of Zapatista discourses and practices. The Zapatistas have situated their political struggle within the historical becoming of the Mexican people ever since their first manifesto titled 'Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle.'[5] This manifesto was launched by the group of Zapatista elders known as Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-General Command (*Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena–Comandancia General*, CCRI-CG) to announce their insurrection against the Mexican government in the early hours of 1994. It is worth quoting the manifesto's opening statements:

> We are the product of 500 years of struggles: first against slavery, then in the war of Independence against Spain led by the insurgents, then to prevent being absorbed by American expansionism, later to enact

> our Constitution and expel the French Empire from our soil, then [against] Porfirio Díaz' dictatorship […] the people rebelled forming their own leaders. Villa and Zapata emerged; poor men like us. We have been denied even the most basic education to use us as cannon fodder and plunder the wealth of our homeland. They do not care that we are dying of hunger and curable diseases, they do not care that we have nothing, absolutely nothing, no dignified roof, no land, no work, no health, no food, no education. We do not have the right to choose our authorities freely and democratically, neither we have independence from foreigners, nor peace or justice for us and our children.
>
> But today we say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! We are inheritors of the true builders of our nation (CCRI-CG 1994b: 33).

The use of 'we' in this Zapatista invective obviously refers to the rebels themselves. The term 'they' represents the political regime of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI), which was complicit in – and benefited from – the unfolding of the historical injustices inflicted upon Indigenous Mexicans. A few days later, on January 18th, the Zapatistas explicitly characterised themselves as an Indigenous movement when describing for the first time to the Mexican public the composition of their membership. The cultural, linguistic, and conceptual framework that underlies the Zapatistas' scrutiny of Mexican history is rooted therefore in the worldview and traditions of the Maya groups inhabiting the Chiapas Highlands – specifically the Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Chol, and Tojolabal peoples. According to the CCRI-CG:

> The commanding officers and troops of the EZLN are predominantly Indigenous people from Chiapas. This is not just because, as Indigenous people, we represent the most humiliated and dispossessed sector of Mexico, but also because, as you can see, we are the most dignified. We are thousands of Indigenous people who have taken up arms, and behind us stand tens of thousands of our own family members. Thus, tens of thousands of Indigenous people are engaged in the struggle. The government claims that it is not an Indigenous uprising, but we believe that when thousands of Indigenous people rise in resistance, it is indeed an Indigenous uprising. There are also Mexicans from

> different social backgrounds and various states of our country who are part of our movement. They agree with us and have joined us because they also reject the exploitation we endure (CCRI-CG 1994a: 74).

This essay draws from the methodology described above – and the Maya framework that informs it – to outline the key elements in the Zapatista conception of justice. It is therefore divided into three parts. The first situates the Zapatista uprising in the history – or, more precisely, the genealogy (Foucault 1966, Foucault 1975, Garland 2014) – of the complex colonial relations that arose in the territory we currently call 'Mexico.' These relations occurred between Indigenous cultures and their Western counterparts, who were initially represented by the European colonisers, and subsequently by the *mestizo* Mexican society and its corresponding state community. The genealogy can well be framed, within the narrative tradition developed by the Zapatistas themselves, as a meandering (political) story whose conclusion remains elusive.[6] The second part analyses the reception within the Mexican national community of a specific aspect of this genealogy (or story): the centuries-old Indigenous moral economy (Thompson 1991) that resists turning land into a commodity. The third part makes explicit the normative principles by which the Zapatistas problematised and specified the Indigenous moral economy in relation to land ownership, which constitute two fundamental pillars of their distinctive conception of political justice: i) command by obeying (*mandar obedeciendo*), and ii) a world where other worlds fit (*un mundo donde quepan otros mundos*).

This lays the foundations for concluding that the symbols, discourses, and practices of the Zapatista rebellion remain pertinent even today, almost three decades after the 1994 uprising. While mainstream media might not be interested in covering the EZLN anymore, the Zapatistas will always have a privileged place in the history of political thought. They have successfully appropriated and filtered, through a unique Mayan cultural lens, the universal values underlying the conception of justice that represents the *raison d'être* of the discourses, practices, and groups that, broadly speaking, are encompassed in what we call 'the left:' *liberty*, enriching human relationships by enabling pluralism;

equality, mitigating the extremes of wealth and poverty; and *dignity*, refusing to yield submissively to power.

2 Genealogy (wherein are recounted some of the many and grievous events that led to the Zapatista insurrection in Chiapas, Mexico)

The origins of the Zapatista uprising can be traced back to an improbable Leviathan that was erected upon an oxymoron: the PRI. The 'artificial man' embodying the Mexican 'Common-Wealth' (Hobbes 1985: 263-264, Brading 1991) indeed sat on a political party that, self-identifying as both revolutionary and institutional, uninterruptedly maintained almost absolute power over the country for seven decades – from 1929 to 2000. The PRI is undoubtedly one of the most perplexing contributions of Mexican imaginaries to the global political discourses of the 20th century.[7] On the one hand, the word 'revolution' implies a radical (though not necessarily violent) change in political and socio-economic structures (Arendt 2006: 11-48, Marx and Engels 1977: 474-482; Tocqueville 1967: 43-82). On the other hand, the term 'institution' refers to human practices pursuing to create stable bonds, associations, and norms (Parsons 1964: 231-235, Weber 2006: 61-66). The PRI thus embodies an insurmountable contradiction. Its constitutive oxymoron, however, emerged victorious in the realm of ideology.

The Mexican Leviathan (and the political party that possessed it) allegedly aimed at ensuring that the ideals of the 1910 Mexican Revolution were effectively materialised through state institutions (Manjarrez 1987: 42-56). The PRI regime was, however, far from this illogical yet generous promise. The 1910 Revolution involved dozens of leaders whose political ideals often lacked internal coherence and contradicted those subscribed to by other revolutionary agents.[8] The impact of the Revolution was quite limited in the field of political morality (Córdova 1973), though its material consequences were undeniable. The new revolutionary elites grafted the principles of individualism and bourgeois accumulation of capital onto feudal

structures inherited from three hundred years of Spanish colonialism (Williams 2011: 18-25). In this sense, the PRI remained (partially) faithful to Spanish colonial legacies when it came to Mexico's Indigenous populations.

A hurting ambiguity permeates these legacies. In the 16th century, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were indeed brutally defeated by the Castilian conquerors (León-Portilla *et al* 1989). The violent processes of the conquest resulted in a demographic catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. This hecatomb was caused not just by the rudimentary administrative and technological capabilities that late-medieval Castile had for undertaking a massive transformation of governance and economy in its colonies (Semo 1986: 29-33), but also by the unique biological isolation of the Americas in relation to the Old World, which facilitated the spread of diseases such as smallpox, measles, typhus, and typhoid (Lomnitz 2005: 67-68).

The Indigenous population of Mexico therefore declined drastically in the 16th century.[9] The horror of widespread mortality played a decisive role in shaping the colonial regime. The realisation of the disaster that Spaniards had wrought over the native peoples of the Americas was disturbing to the colonisers themselves (Lomnitz 2005: 72-74). A new law of the land was laid amidst the frenzy unleashed, on the one hand, by the desecration of life caused by the frightening scale of death in the New World and, on the other hand, by the unyielding condemnation of that same desecration in the work of Catholic missionaries such as Bartolomé de las Casas (1997), Toribio de Benavente 'Motolinía' (2014), or Vasco de Quiroga (1985). These missionaries were extremely critical of the abuse of native people by the *encomenderos* – that is, the European settlers who, in recognition of their contributions to the conquest wars or their role in populating new territories, were granted privileges akin to feudal lordship over a group of Indigenous workers (Zavala 1973). This scathing criticism eventually persuaded Charles V to issue the 'New Laws' (*Leyes Nuevas*) of 1542-1543, which recognised Indigenous people (legally referred to as *Indians*) as free persons and vassals of the Spanish monarch to prevent their exploitation and mistreatment by

the *encomenderos* (Muro Orejón 1961).

Colonial statecraft in the Viceroyalty of New Spain (whose vast jurisdiction comprised, among other lands of the Spanish empire, the current territory of Mexico) thus largely reacted to what Bartolomé de las Casas called 'the destruction of the Indies' (1997), in 'an effort to move beyond the moment of animalistic depredation to the sphere of political life' (Lomnitz 2005: 97). In the 16th century Iberian Peninsula, the most eminent scholars of the era – including the missionaries mentioned above, and others such as Francisco de Vitoria (1989) or Domingo de Soto (1968) – spearheaded an intellectual movement that thoroughly examined the (il)legitimacy of the Castilian conquest of the Americas (Beuchot 1997). The debate revolved around the question of whether the European war waged against the Indigenous peoples had been just or unjust. While this controversy generated consensus regarding the preaching of the Gospel as a justification for the conquest wars, missionaries such as Bartolomé de las Casas (1992) harshly criticised the use of violence for imposing religious beliefs, advocating instead for peaceful persuasion through rational means.

In sum, while the conquest of the territory we nowadays call 'Mexico' consisted of a protracted military campaign that denied the value of Indigenous labour and life, paradoxically, the coming into being of the colonial state harnessed to a series of ethical, political, and legal processes recognising the value of culturally distinct Indigenous lives and labour (Hanke 1949). To understand these processes, we must keep in mind that the Kingdom of Castile – not Spain – conducted the conquest of the Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica. The nation we know today as 'Spain' was an assemblage of medieval kingdoms in the late 15th century (Edwards 2000).[10] The development of the modern notion of a Spanish state unfolds concurrently with the colonisation of the Americas (Lynch 1991).

Medieval societies – such as Castile – exhibited a persistent tension between the universal and the local (García de Cortázar and Sesma Muñoz 1999, Pirenne 2011). Individuals resided in local settings such as the village, the feudal castle, or the monastery. Nonetheless, they also

functioned as integral components of a broader political community, encompassing entities such as the Empire or the Papacy. Above all, they were part of Christendom, which represented the culmination of the interdependent hierarchical orders upon which the medieval political world was built. Legal systems mirrored these political tensions. A single person was subject to multiple jurisdictions, including local customs, feudal privileges granted to certain cities or social classes (*fueros*), the *lex mercatoria* followed by the emerging bourgeoisie, the canon law of the Catholic Church, and ancient Roman law (García Pelayo 1968b, Grossi 1995). The architects of the colonial legal order established in New Spain drew upon this legal sensibility (Geertz: 175-219), which, although chaotic and impractical, demonstrated substantive openness towards cultural diversity.

The colonial legal system in New Spain was founded upon the 'order of the republic' (*orden de la república*) (Lira and Muro 1998: 438), a pluralistic idea that divided the population of the Americas in two separate yet interconnected domains: the 'republic of Spaniards' (*república de los españoles*) and the 'republic of the Indians' (*república de indios*). In response to the exploitative practices of the colonisers, the Crown sought to protect the Indigenous peoples by keeping them apart from the Europeans. Both communities had distinct legal statuses, but they were equally subject to the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church and the political authority of the Crown (Lira and Muro 1991: 437-450).

As part of the policy of segregating Indigenous people and Spaniards, the council (*cabildo*) of the 'Indian villages' (*pueblos de indios*) consisted exclusively of Indigenous members. In big cities such as Mexico or Puebla, there were two separate councils, one for Indigenous individuals and another for Spaniards (Carrasco 1991: 11). These *pueblos de indios* were loosely structured as a modified type of the classic Castilian municipality, though incorporating some preconquest governmental forms, functions, and institutions (Aguirre Beltrán 1953: 37-38). The Crown recommended to uphold the positions and privileges of the traditional Indigenous nobility in the densely populated regions

that were initially colonised by the Spanish (Carrasco 1991: 9-10). What emerged was a system whereby the traditional local elders (*principales*) of Indigenous villages became the authorities recognised by the Spaniards as the representative voice of the community. The system demonstrated a remarkable level of functionality in maintaining the stability of the colonial order. The village elders, at no administrative expense, diverted latent hostilities, resolved most of the intra-community legal disputes, and, above all, guaranteed the exploitation of the local resources in the form of tributes and taxes (Klein 1966: 249).[11]

The Crown also provided Indigenous communities with communal lands for their sustenance (Carrasco 1991: 19-20). We need to grasp the feudal political pact established between the Crown of Castile and its Indigenous vassals to understand the underlying principles governing the distribution of communal lands. Once the conquest wars were over, Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza convened Indigenous nobles to establish the specific modalities of their allegiance to the Castilian monarchs. This political pact was formalised on November 4, 1605 (Menegus 1994: 220-225). The pact stipulates that Indigenous communities recognise the Crown of Castile as the successor to their native rulers. In recognition of the Castilian monarchs' sovereignty, Indigenous communities agree to pay tribute. In return, the monarchs acknowledge Indigenous peoples as their free vassals and affirm their right to land ownership.

The communal lands of Indigenous communities continued to operate under a property regime akin to the one existing in the pre-Columbian era, though adapted to conform to colonial norms. The ownership title was communal and derived from longstanding usage certified by the Crown, from a royal grant that extended pre-existing property rights, or from the royal concession of new lands (López Sarrelangue 1966). The legal protectionism of the Crown thus channelled the profound connection that Indigenous communities had to their lands, which they viewed as an integral part of their identity, the primary source of their sustenance, and the bedrock of their dignity and autonomy (Miranda 1966: 169-176).

This pluralistic colonial order facilitated highly sophisticated patterns of cultural exchange. Indigenous cultures found themselves subordinated to the colonial project, albeit embedded in a dialectical interplay of resistance and reciprocal influences vis-à-vis the culture of the colonisers (Lockhart 1992). I use the term 'culture' here to denote the framework within which individuals imbue their lives with purpose and ascribe meaning to their actions and experiences. Culture thus encompasses the social practices that shape and transform such purposes and meanings or, in the words of Raymond Williams (1968: 12), the 'relations between the elements in a whole way of life.'

The religious domain stands out as a prominent illustration of the operational dynamics in these cultural relationships. Castile, in contrast to other colonial powers, fervently aimed to convert Indigenous peoples to Christianity. This endeavour, for obvious reasons, eroded Indigenous religious pluralism and modified their worldview, as seen in relation to sexual conceptions and practices (Eudave Eusebio 2021). The Catholic missionaries, however, also sought to familiarise themselves with the beliefs, history, and traditions of the groups they sought to evangelise. Bernardino de Sahagún (2000), preeminent among these pioneering scholars of Indigenous cultures, meticulously chronicled the ethnographic and linguistic groundwork underpinning his missionary undertakings. Christian religious texts were frequently translated from Latin into Indigenous languages. Christian dogmas were likewise conveyed into Indigenous concepts through artistic expressions such as theatre (Horcasitas 2004: 545-560, Vargas Montes 2012: 289-290).

Cultural exchanges between Indigenous and Spanish societies in New Spain not only led to religious syncretism but also fostered *mestizaje* (race-mixture). The ethnic diversity of the Americas significantly expanded from the 16th century, resulting from intermingling of European, African, and Asian groups among themselves and with Indigenous peoples. This gave rise to the '*castas*' that formed New Spain's *mestizo* population (Florescano 2001: 171). New Spain, however, was not a haven of cultural and ethnic pluralism. Spaniards considered themselves chosen to spread the Gospel among the pagans and sustain

Christianity in the New World. In this role, as noted by Enrique Florescano (2001: 170), they ideologically deemed themselves 'superior' to other ethnic groups, including Indigenous peoples. Luis Villoro (1998: 9) points out that such an understanding of the relationships between Europeans and Indigenous peoples indeed involves a blatant form of 'false consciousness,' as it depends on a 'conceptual framework and belief system' that distorts the colonial order by trying to validate it. The notion of the moral superiority of the Spaniards, like any other ideology, obviously resulted in *material* consequences ranging from the imposition of tributes on Indigenous communities by the Crown, to the unequal balance of commercial exchange between Spanish cities and the *pueblos de indios* (Semo 1986: 83-99). Its most wicked fruition, however, only surfaced once the *criollos* – those born in New Spain to European parents – began to harbour aspirations for independence from the metropolis.

Seeking a distinct identity that rejected Europe as a model, the *criollos* appropriated the ancient Indigenous civilisations that were defeated in the conquest wars as a compelling motive for their emancipation (Villoro 1998: 113-175). By the early 19th century, insurgent movements arose in New Spain, connecting the concept of an independent Mexican nation to the idea of a pre-conquest Indigenous nation. Florescano (2001: 286) aptly notes that, 'in contrast to the other Spanish colonies […] the Mexican movement achieved independence based on the assumption that an Indigenous nation existed prior to the European invasion.' The Spanish conquerors did not actually find a singular Indigenous nation, but rather a multitude of diverse peoples comprising distinct cultures. Nonetheless, the belief in this myth legitimised the *criollos* in relation to Indigenous and *mestizo* groups. The Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821) was framed as an act of reparation against the injustices of Castilian conquest and as an opportunity to fulfill the historical project of a Mexican Empire that supposedly had been thwarted under the European domination.

These fantasies ignited nationalist outrage against colonial legacies. They also created an insurmountable gap between the imaginary historical Indigenous civilisations which the nascent Mexican nation

strove to reclaim, and the existing Indigenous communities who were increasingly seen by the new ruling classes as an impediment to Mexico's development (Florescano 2001: 310-320). For example, José María Luis Mora (1986: I: 67) – one of the early proponents of liberalism in Mexico – regarded the insistence of Indigenous peoples on vindicating their communal land rights from the colonial era as an insurmountable obstacle to Mexico's progress. He accordingly proposed, as a (very racist) solution to the alleged backwardness of Indigenous peoples, their assimilation within the 'general mass' of the 'white race,' which symbolised the 'Mexican character' and the best 'idea of the Republic' due to its 'enlightenment and wealth,' and 'influence in public affairs' (Mora 1986: I: 74-75).

The independent Mexican state thus emerged as a more hostile adversary to Indigenous peoples than the Spanish Crown. Despite the virtually unremitting civil war between the liberal and conservative parties in 19th century Mexico, both targeted Indigenous communities. The campaign directed against them, focusing primarily on communal lands, reached its apex with the enactment, on June 25, 1856, of the Law of Disentailment of the Rural and Urban Estates of Civil and Religious Corporations (*Ley de Desamortización de las Fincas Rústicas y Urbanas de las Corporaciones Civiles y Religiosas*), commonly known as the '*Ley Lerdo*' after its author, liberal statesman Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. The liberal faction aimed to revitalise public finances by seizing properties from the Catholic Church and Indigenous communities, which they believed had substantial value that did not contribute sufficiently to the demands of free enterprise and economic growth (Bazant 1966). The *Ley Lerdo* imposed restrictions on the Church and Indigenous communities, forbidding them from owning or managing real estate and mandating the sale of their existing holdings. The liberal Constitution of 1857 affirmed the *Ley Lerdo* principles and intensified the efforts to dismantle communal lands (Tena Ramírez 1999: 595-629). Understandably, Indigenous people actively fought against these liberal laws, often resorting to armed resistance in defence of their lands (Miranda 1966: 178-181).

The *Ley Lerdo*, designed to address the state's finances while fostering a class of small landowners for economic progress, paradoxically led to the concentration of agricultural property in the hands of wealthy *hacendados* (landowners). Exploiting these laws, they compelled the auctioning of communal lands to the highest bidder through local courts (Sinkin 1979: 172-173). The tribulations of Indigenous communities thus exposed liberalism's limitations in understanding and integrating diverse worldviews and conceptions of justice. The 1857 Constitution, while ostensibly granting equal rights to all Mexican citizens, deprived Indigenous peoples of the protection offered by the customary laws – respected throughout the colonial era – that safeguarded their communal way of life. Furthermore, it stripped them of legal personality to defend their lands and failed to provide any social legislation in their favour (Florescano 2001: 429-431). The struggle for land eventually eclipsed Indigenous identities, giving way to a new class-based identity where *campesinos* (that is, peasants or, more accurately, *people from the fields*), including those from other ethnic backgrounds like mulattos or *mestizos*, clashed with the landowners and urban elites (Florescano 2001: 327, Womack 1969: ix-x).

This class warfare permeated the entire territory of Mexico. In the southern state of Morelos, for instance, the residents of the town of Anenecuilco engaged in a decades-long struggle for land and water rights against the local sugar cane landlords (Womack 1969: 4). On September 12, 1909, the residents of this serene town elected a young man named Emiliano Zapata as the *calpuleque* (a Nahua term meaning chief or leader) of the Board of Defence of communal lands. Following the vote, the elders took Zapata aside and presented him with the colonial-era titles that confirmed Anenecuilco's ownership of the communal lands. The names inscribed on the ancient map of Anenecuilco, which had been endorsed by the authorities of New Spain, were recorded in the Nahua language (Krauze 1987: 46-47).

Shortly thereafter, Zapata came across a copy of the *Plan de San Luis*, whose proclamation by Francisco I. Madero marked the onset of the 1910 Revolution. Article 3 of the Plan pledged to restore to

Indigenous people the lands from which they had been dispossessed since the enactment of the *Ley Lerdo* (Silva Herzog 2010b: 180). Under Zapata's leadership, the ancestral resolve of Indigenous communities to defend their communal lands thus merged with the revolutionary movement. When Madero, however, failed to fulfil his promise of land restitution, Zapata accused him of 'lack of integrity and extreme weakness' (Silva Herzog 2010b: 310). On November 25, 1911, Zapata launched the *Plan de Ayala* – his own revolutionary manifesto. This document would become the paradigmatic program of rural rebellions in Mexico, as evidenced by its enduring allure, even eight decades later, among the Indigenous insurgents in Chiapas. The Plan authorized the 'communities and citizens' stripped of their lands and water rights to forcefully recover these assets, 'resolutely maintaining their possession, by any means necessary, with arms in hand' (Silva Herzog 2010b: 313).

The Zapatista movement persevered in fighting for the realisation of its agrarian program from 1911 to 1919, a period that tragically concluded with the assassination of Emiliano Zapata. Nevertheless, the impact of the movement extended beyond the death of its leader. The agrarian demands championed by the Zapatistas were acknowledged and integrated into the provisions of the newly established 1917 Constitution. Article 27 outlined the agrarian reform demanded by Zapata by declaring all land, water, and mineral rights to be the property of the people of Mexico. This constitutional provision also gave the government a mandate to expropriate land from large landholders and to give it to eligible agrarian communities under the legal form of *ejidos* – that is, collective usufruct rights which, in principle, are not intended to be leased or sold to external third parties beyond the respective communities (Tena Ramírez 1999: 828-830, De Ibarrola 1983: 372-373).

This is how our journey through 500 years of Mexican history brings us back to the beginning of our story. Once the guns of the Mexican Revolution went silent, the PRI ruled over Mexico using a blend of repression, co-optation and electoral fraud as strategies to retain political power (Cossío 2001: 15-76, González Casanova

1986: 177-229). The interpretation of the 1917 Constitution and the implementation of corporatism played a crucial role in solidifying the PRI's authoritarian regime. One of the main challenges in understanding the PRI governments lies in the dual normative framework on which they operated, as the democratic principles enshrined in the constitutional norms were adapted to function under non-democratic conditions (Cossío 2001: 77-143). Corporatism legitimised these adaptive processes. The PRI divided Mexican society into three distinct categories referred to as 'sectors' (*sectores*): workers, *campesinos*, and a broader group known as the 'popular sector,' which encompassed various other client groups aligned with the regime. These sectors not only ensured electoral support for the PRI but also served as platforms through which their members could participate in the exercise of public power.

The 1917 Constitution originally did not provide explicit protection for Indigenous communities in their distinct identities but rather recognised them as *campesinos* entitled to receive communal lands. The effective and responsible implementation of this constitutional mandate could have been swiftly achieved. The PRI, however, established the National Peasant Confederation (*Confederación Nacional Campesina*, CNC) in 1936 as an intermediary between the government and the rural population (Warman 1979: 106-108). The land sought by independent *campesino* organisations was frequently relinquished to the CNC, which offered informal support and precarious agreements on land ownership, rather than facilitating the actual distribution of communal lands (Cossío 2001: 56-57). The PRI thus partially resurrected the ancient colonial system of endowing communal lands while postponing indefinitely its fulfilment. This strategic approach – which Courtney Jung (2008: 118) accurately labels as 'the politics of [granting] small things' (*la política de dar cositas*) – ensured the PRI's political support base in rural areas, as it constantly translated into votes for the party, while reinforcing its legitimacy by associating itself with the historical figure of Emiliano Zapata.

In this context, a key figure in the relations between the Mexican

state and Indigenous peoples was the local leader (usually called *cacique*), who typically had one foot in the community and the other in the PRI's system of negotiation and co-optation (Gilly 1997: 53-54). Many *caciques* became wealthy by taking advantage of the income and privileges that the PRI's system of control bestowed upon them (Rus 1994: 284-293). The corrupt paternalism of the regime, however, left in the hands of the Indigenous communities themselves a universe of beliefs, values, and practices – in short, a culture – that was subordinated to the PRI's political structures, but never dissolved into them.

The authority of the *caciques* derived primarily from the trust conferred upon them by the community. No matter how self-interested their decisions could be, they often took great care to justify them in terms of tradition and the community's imperative to maintain cohesion (Rus 1994: 293-298). The hegemony of the PRI hence resulted in the emergence of new forms of cultural interplay between Indigenous communities and the predominantly *mestizo* Mexican society. On the one hand, the PRI strategically employed Indigenous cultures as tools to reinforce its power dynamics. On the other hand, by incorporating these cultures into its political apparatus, the PRI inadvertently played a role in their preservation and safeguarding. Indigenous communities upheld in this way a distinct cultural world where the silent resistance of five centuries thrived, hidden from the view of PRI officials and sycophants. In 1994, this resistance finally erupted in the form of subversion, triggered by a new ruling elite associated with the processes of economic globalisation who decided to restore the modernising projects of the 19th century liberals without including, yet again, the Indigenous peoples in their entrepreneurial schemes.

3 The moral economy of Indigenous Mexicans, or the plea of the dead who died in vain

On October 4, 1987, Carlos Salinas de Gortari was officially endorsed as the PRI candidate for the 1988 presidential election. He was a neoliberal economist who had obtained a doctoral degree from Harvard Kennedy School in 1978, (ironically) focusing his research on

rural Mexican communities (Salinas de Gortari 1982). Following his nomination, a group of dissatisfied party members led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano, who opposed the party's shift towards neoliberal policies in previous years, decided to break away and pursue an independent candidacy. Cárdenas formed a broad left-wing coalition known as the National Democratic Front (*Frente Democrático Nacional*, FDN) (Carr 2000: 305-310). He garnered significant and widespread support during the electoral campaign. Simultaneously, the traditional conservative opposition represented by the National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional*, PAN) put forth a charismatic businessman from Sinaloa, Manuel J. Clouthier, as their candidate (Loaeza 1999: 440-450).

The Mexican political system was ill-prepared to confront genuinely competitive elections. Amidst pervasive rumours of fraud, the electoral process on July 6, 1988, unfolded in an atmosphere permeated by uncertainty and suspicion. That evening, Manuel Bartlett, the Secretary of the Interior entrusted with organising the elections, did not release the preliminary results, declaring that the counting system had experienced a 'breakdown.'[12] When updated information regarding the electoral outcomes was finally made available to the public, the PRI candidate was inexplicably ahead (Loaeza 1999: 455-460). Both domestically and internationally, the validity of the elections was called into question. Despite the official results proclaiming Salinas as the victor with a majority of votes, a significant segment of the population persisted in believing that Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was the true winner (Gilly 1997: 63-64, Krauze 1997: 413-414).

Jorge Volpi (2011: 123) correctly notes that Salinas de Gortari 'assumed the presidency with the ignominious stain of being a "usurper".' His administration persistently pursued through policy the legitimacy it did not gain in the polls. The president's most ambitious endeavour was to secure the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In early 1992, Salinas proposed (and succeeded in) reforming article 27 of the Constitution to align the land ownership system with those of Mexico's potential trading

partners, Canada and the United States. This constitutional amendment closed the door to future distributions of communal land, legalised its privatisation, and facilitated the bulk purchase of plots, lands, and forests by privately owned shareholder companies (Tena 1999: 1075-1080). Salinas' reform thus enabled the PRI apparatus to build alliances with a range of financial agents, facilitating the dynamics of dispossession and accumulation of land that the 1917 Constitution tried to prevent.

Salinas flaunted the same arrogance that instigated the *Ley Lerdo*, and his constitutional reform swiftly produced similar effects. On January 1st, 1994, the day in which NAFTA came into force, the EZLN took up arms. In the 'Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle,' the CCRI-CG (1994b: 34) characterized Salinas as the 'supreme and illegitimate federal executive that today holds power.' This accusation was extremely relevant given the pervasive doubts around the president's legitimacy. The Zapatista elders then invoked article 39 of the Constitution, which places the origin of national sovereignty in the Mexican people. Exercising this original sovereignty, which grants Mexicans the right to alter or modify their form of government, the CCRI-CG (1994b: 34-35) ordered the Zapatista troops to 'advance toward the capital of the country, overcoming the Mexican federal army, protecting the civilian population […] and permitting the liberated towns to elect their own administrative authorities freely and democratically.'

On that very day, ten laws were unveiled to regulate the territories acquired by the Zapatistas, circulated through a pamphlet titled 'The Mexican Wake Up Call' (*El Despertador Mexicano*), dated December 31, 1993. Among these laws, the Revolutionary Agrarian Law (*Ley Revolucionaria Agraria*) stands out, which imposes limitations on individual land ownership (article 3), promotes collective property (article 5), mandates the expropriation of large agricultural corporations (article 11), and establishes 'meeting the needs of the people' as primary objective of agricultural production (article 10) (CCRI-CG 1993: 43-44). These provisions are justified on the following rationale:

> The ongoing struggle of impoverished peasants in Mexico persists in claiming the land for those who toil it. Building upon the legacy of Emiliano Zapata and in defiance of the amendments to article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, the EZLN resumes the righteous battle for land and freedom in the Mexican countryside (CCRI-CG 1993: 43-44).

The grandiloquence exhibited in these documents may appear excessive unless one comprehends its symbolic significance. On the same day that the Mexican financial elite celebrated the commencement of NAFTA, an armed Indigenous group seized control of San Cristóbal de las Casas, which was historically known as Ciudad Real, a city associated with conquerors and landowners (De Vos 1997: 77-104, García de León 1993: I: 36-74). This event, as Adolfo Gilly points out (1997: 14-15), was a compelling invitation to rethink the ends and means of globalisation, where 'modernity gives way to barbarism' as some 'societies, nations, and communities' assert their existence at the expense of the 'disintegration, destruction, or nonexistence of others.'

The insurrection indeed brought attention to the historical abandonment and hardships suffered by the Indigenous communities in Chiapas, a land rich in resources though populated by the poorest among poor Mexicans.[13] President Salinas aimed to downplay the magnitude of the conflict, which inevitably exposed the failure of the ruling elites to establish dignified living conditions in the region, from colonial times to the present day[14] – including Salinas' own administration, which so fervently pursued Mexico's modernisation. After several days of armed confrontation between the Zapatistas and the Mexican army, Salinas unilaterally declared a ceasefire on January 12, 1994, in response to major popular demonstrations (particularly in Mexico City) where the streets were taken by protesters chanting to the rallying cry of 'Stop the massacre!' (Gilly 1997: 80, Villoro 2023: 133-134).

This decision effectively marked the end of the war, albeit not before Salinas assured that 'those who participated [in the insurgency] under pressure or desperation, and who now embrace peace and legality, will find forgiveness' (Volpi 2011: 278). A few days later, on January

15, Salinas announced a general amnesty for those involved in the uprising between the first day of the year and 11:00 a.m. on Sunday, January 16 (Volpi 2011: 283). The Zapatista reaction to this display of presidential condescension was poised to alter the course of Mexico's history. Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos responded with a communiqué – dated on January 18 – that is a masterpiece of political discourse, and a brilliant jurisprudential critique on the nexus between violence, injury, justice, and mercy:

> […] we have only become aware of the federal government's formal offer to 'pardon' our troops. What do we have to ask forgiveness for? What are they going to forgive us for? For not dying of hunger? For not accepting our misery in silence? For not humbly accepting the enormous historical burden of contempt and abandonment? For rising up in arms after we found all other paths closed? For not heeding the Chiapas Penal Code, the most absurd and repressive in history? For showing to the rest of the country and the entire world that human dignity still exists and resides among the poorest people? For preparing ourselves well and conscientiously before we began our uprising? For bringing rifles into battle instead of bows and arrows? For learning to fight before doing so? For being Mexican, all of us? For being mainly Indigenous? For calling on the Mexican people to fight, in all possible ways, for what rightfully belongs to them? For fighting for freedom, democracy, and justice? For not following the example of previous guerrilla armies? For not surrendering? For not selling out? For not betraying ourselves?
>
> Who should ask for forgiveness, and who can grant it? (Subcomandante Marcos 1994: 89-90)

Marcos' harrowing *dubitatio* (1994: 90) continues for another page, addressing issues such as the devastating impact of hunger and curable diseases (for example, measles or cholera) on Indigenous communities, the nomenclature of discrimination and its associated geographies of hatred in Chiapas, and the racist violence that relentlessly corrodes a law in whose making Indigenous peoples did not have a real saying. Marcos concludes (1994: 90) by posing the question of whether only 'the dead who died in vain' ultimately possess the authority to grant

forgiveness.

This communiqué marked the onset of what Jorge Volpi (2011: 290) characterises as 'the war of words,' echoing José Angel Gurría, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, who in April 1995 aimed to reassure anxious investors by describing the Chiapas conflict as a 'war of ink and Internet' (Montes 1995). This 'war of words' signals a transition from open armed confrontation to a series of dialectical and deliberative exchanges between the Mexican government, civil society, and the EZLN. These exchanges contested the intellectual and moral leadership of Mexico's ruling classes. Marcos transformed the public perception of the Zapatista movement by asserting that only those who have committed transgressions are obligated to seek forgiveness, thereby challenging the legitimacy of treating the historical grievances of Mexican Indigenous populations as transgressions, and evidencing that the government lacked the moral standing to extend forgiveness. The powerful rhetoric structuring the communiqué dismantled any claim of legitimacy in Salinas' benevolence, prompting non-Indigenous Mexicans to think seriously about the historical debt owed to Indigenous Mexicans (Montemayor 1998: 41). Octavio Paz (who initially criticised the path of violence chosen by the insurgents), for example, commented with profound emotion:

> I do not close my eyes to the destitution and abandonment experienced by Indigenous communities. Amid shifting political and economic systems, some ascending and others declining, as governments come and go over the passage of years and centuries, their pleas remain unheard and disregarded. The poignant letter that 'Subcomandante' Marcos sent to several newspapers on January 18 touched me deeply, despite my disapproval of the path he has chosen. It made me realise that it is not the Indigenous people of Mexico who should bear the burden of asking for forgiveness, but rather us, the ones who should seek repentance […] I neither turn a blind eye to the responsibilities that lie upon our authorities, especially those in Chiapas, nor to the grave obligations of the selfish and obtuse privileged classes of that prosperous province. In fact, this responsibility extends to the entire Mexican society. We, almost all of us, to varying degrees, are guilty

> of perpetuating the unjust plight endured by the Indigenous people of Mexico […] (Paz 1994: C)

Paz' reflections capture a pivotal moment in the reception of Zapatismo among various segments of Mexican civil society. Originally conceived as an armed rebellion, the Zapatista movement underwent a remarkable metamorphosis upon engaging with public discourses held in the civil society at large. This shift heralded an extraordinary political phenomenon, where the tides of civil war were not only halted but gradually gave way to a peaceful pursuit of new frontiers in democracy, justice, and tolerance. The Zapatista revolution did not seek power, but rather focused on transforming civil society. As a result, the reception of Zapatismo brought about profound changes in the movement's trajectory while reshaping the very fabric of the Mexican political realm, as Jacques Rancière (1995: 19-40; 2005: 40-57) broadly understands this term (*la politique*) – that is, as the struggle of an unrecognized party for equal recognition in a polity, or, in other terms, the pursuit of substantive equality.

Adolfo Gilly (1997: 13) explains this historical development as resulting from a 'culture of rebellion' that wove together the threads of a longstanding legacy of Indigenous resistance, the agrarian claims underpinning the Zapatista uprising, and the receptive echoes of justice invoked by the movement. Such a culture is embedded in social practices and shared beliefs, wherein rebellion, 'under certain circumstances and at specific moments, appears to be a natural entitlement and a legitimate recourse' (Gilly 1997: 13). In the case of Indigenous communities, threats to their communal lands, their political autonomy, or their cultural commonality (that is, their shared lives and livelihoods, which are normed by an ethos of reciprocity), have traditionally been regarded as rightful causes for engaging in protest, rioting, or even revolting (Gilly 1997: 22-23, Tutino 1986: 31-33, Esteva and Guerrero Osorio 2018: 34-36).

In 1847, for example, the Maya rebellion known as the 'Caste War' erupted in Yucatán (Reed 1964: 53-97). This rebellion exhibited traces of liberal influence through its modern call for equality before

the law. The Maya insurgents, however, also brought to the forefront the ancestral issue of communal land ownership (Gilly 1997: 18). As Gilbert Joseph notes:

> […] in the rebel Maya's own account of the rebellion […] it is clear that the 1847 insurgency assumed the dimensions of a social revolution against the encroachment of commercial agriculture […] A dominant theme in the communications of the Indian leaders is that laws should apply to all peoples, whatever their ethnic background. The burden of taxation should be borne by all racial categories, land should be available to everyone (and 'the forest should not be purchasable'), and no ethnic group should have the right to abuse another physically with impunity (Joseph 1988: 177-178).

This example allows us to comprehend, as suggested by Adolfo Gilly (1997: 17) drawing upon an aphorism by Walter Benjamin (2013: I-3: 1232), that rural uprisings in Mexico have not functioned as the 'locomotives of history,' but rather as a means for Indigenous communities to 'pull the emergency brake.' From this perspective, Indigenous rebellions can be seen, in their broader context, as movements aimed at defending traditional society and its connections to the land. They arise in opposition to the intrusion of modernity, represented on the one hand by the capitalist realm of market transactions and money (as the mediators and facilitators of all human relations), and on the other hand by the modern nation-state and its legal framework, which secures the universality of these exchanges.

The 1847 Caste War, of course, is not the sole instance of an Indigenous uprising driven by the communal will to endure in the face of modern individualistic structures that dissolve and negate the very sense of community and commonality. John Womack (1968: ix), for example, famously characterised the original Zapatista involvement in the 1910 Mexican Revolution as a story about 'country people who did not want to move and therefore got into a revolution' against 'powerful entrepreneurs living in the cities' who tried 'to make the villagers move in order to progress themselves.'

Gilly (1997: 24-25) accordingly identifies the rural community

as the common subject of Indigenous rebellions that have erupted in Southern Mexico – spanning from the establishment of the Tzeltal 'republic' in 1712 (Klein 1966) to the ongoing contemporary Zapatista rebellion since 1994. These rebellions share as fundamental premises 'the resistance against accepting the commodification of land; the refusal to reduce the cultural and historical foundation of interpersonal exchanges within the community to mere market transactions among objects; and the opposition to external forces encroaching upon the natural order of these exchanges' (Gilly 1997: 19). In essence, the underlying motivation behind Indigenous uprisings thus lies in the persistence of a distinctive form of Indigenous *moral economy*, reminiscent of E.P. Thompson's classic notion (1991: 185-351), with communal lands embodying a tangible manifestation of the normative principles informing the community itself.

Thompson (1980: 64-73) broadly understands the moral economy as a series of normative assumptions grounded on an 'unwritten popular code' that teaches 'the immorality of […] profiteering upon the necessities of the people.' Individuals who act upon the mandates of the moral economy are informed by the belief that they are 'defending traditional rights and customs,' and, in general, that they are 'supported by the wider consensus of the community' (Thompson 1991: 188). An 'outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation' is therefore a legitimate cause for undertaking 'direct action' (Thompson 1991: 188).

In the case of the EZLN, the constitutional reform promoted by Salinas served as the catalyst for revolutionary outrage, driven by the conceptions of justice inherent to the Indigenous moral economy. According to Subcomandante Marcos' account of the EZLN's birth (Gilly, Subcomandante Marcos, and Ginzburg 1995: 140), the idea that 'the people want to fight' circulated among Indigenous communities in the Highlands of Chiapas by 1992. This sentiment arose from escalating repressive measures by the local government, the amendment of article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, worsening economic conditions, and the devastating impact of widespread epidemics.

Some *mestizo* guerrilla fighters who, like Marcos, were based in the area, advised the communities that, in the global political climate of the late 20th century, they had very limited prospects of achieving success through armed struggle. Marcos claims (Gilly, Subcomandante Marcos, and Ginzburg 1995: 140) that the communities responded to these cautions by indicating that, given the lethal social and economic conditions in which they had been placed, they could not afford the luxury of 'knowing what is happening in the rest of the world,' but rather were compelled to focus on 'asking the people' in their own villages about their views on an armed uprising. This marked the commencement of a deliberative process, manifested through a series of community consultations, which culminated in the formation of the CCRI-CG in January 1993 (Gilly, Subcomandante Marcos, and Ginzburg 1995: 141). Throughout that year, preparations were made to put the revolution into action.

Salinas' constitutional reform alone, however, is insufficient to fully explain the eruption of the revolution. As Carlos Montemayor (1998: 49) suggests, in Mexico (and probably everywhere else), 'popular wars [...] do not start overnight and do not conclude in a day.' The Zapatista uprising had been brewing for a considerable time, fuelled by grievances that, in the words of Chiapas historian Antonio García de León (1993: I: 18), have deep roots in 'traditionalism turned into destitution by capitalism.'

The Zapatistas themselves would articulate the substance of these grievances. Following President Salinas' declaration of amnesty, the Mexican army ceased its advance and laid siege to the territories occupied by the rebels, which consequently remained under Zapatista control. In mid-February, with Bishop Samuel Ruiz of the Diocese of San Cristóbal as mediator, the Dialogue for Peace and Reconciliation (*Diálogo por la Paz y la Reconciliación*) commenced between delegates from the federal government and the EZLN. In early March, at the outset of the negotiation process, the CCRI-CG (1994d: 179) presented a set of demands on behalf of 'the Indigenous peoples of the state of Chiapas, risen in arms with the EZLN against poverty

and the bad government.' This document begins by enumerating the eight reasons behind the rebellion, following the style of traditional letters of grievances (*memoriales de agravios*). The first of these reasons is as follows: 'The hunger, poverty, and marginalisation that [Mexican Indigenous people] have endured since time immemorial.'

This motive for Indigenous rebellion encompasses all others and explains why significant segments of Mexico's non-Indigenous population embraced the values of the Indigenous moral economy. Rather than an external demand, these values served as an urgent call to take responsibility for the egregious injustices that Mexican government, laws, and institutions have inflicted upon generations of Indigenous Mexicans who, in Marcos' words, have 'died in vain.' The national support for the EZLN (which later broadened to the international level) simply stems from acknowledging that their demands are just. In this way, a portion of Mexican civil society opened itself – at least for a few years – to recognise, define, and shape the future of justice through the lens of Indigenous worldviews that do not draw on the mythical societies defeated in the European conquest wars of the 16th century, but on the everyday realities of the First Peoples of Mexico. The Zapatistas thus shaped a vision of justice that is at once utopian but within reach – or, as Ernst Bloch (2013) would term it, a *hope* that projects both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Mexicans, imaginatively and through their political agency, into a future that pulls us toward its fulfilment because we already have grasped it as possible.

4 Many colours, plural worlds: the Zapatista model of a just society

The first phase of formal dialogue between the EZLN and the Mexican government took place from February to June 1994. Among the demands put forth by the Zapatistas, the following claim stands out: 'That our rights and dignity as Indigenous peoples be respected, taking into account our culture and tradition' (CCRI-CG 1994d: 182). In making this demand, the Zapatistas asserted their *right to be recognized as citizens*, thus advocating for the realisation of longstanding republican principles of equality (Villoro 2015: 32-38). Simultaneously,

they vindicated their *right to (cultural and political) difference*, thereby demanding the coexistence of diverse collective identities within the framework of republican equality (Gilly 1997: 97, Villoro 2015: 39-49).

Throughout the negotiation process, the Zapatistas performatively demonstrated the interdependence and mutual reinforcement of these normative demands. For example, a Zapatista leader – Comandante David – introduced himself to government negotiators as 'David, Tzotzil, one hundred percent denizen of Chiapas, one-hundred percent Mexican' (Monsiváis 1995: 470). The point was further emphasised when the Zapatista delegates unfolded and displayed the Mexican flag. The government commissioner, Manuel Camacho Solís, felt obliged to join them by holding up a corner (Monsiváis 1995: 471). The Zapatistas thus conveyed to the public that their fight was not against the Mexican nation, but for a new form of nationhood in which Mexico's diverse cultures would be equally recognised.

At first glance, these gestures align with the mainstream currents of multiculturalism of the final decade of the 20th century. The Zapatistas indeed recognise that 'we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us' (Taylor 1994: 32-33). The Zapatista demands for cultural recognition also call for reciprocity among equals (Taylor 1994: 50), because they assume that nonrecognition or misrecognition can cause serious harm (Taylor 1994: 25). Finally, the Zapatistas have advocated for preventing the infliction of this type of harm upon Indigenous groups through legal protections that provide them with an 'anchor for self-identification and the safety of effortless secure belonging' (Kymlicka 1995: 89).

The normative discourse of the EZLN, however, ultimately transcends the confines of conventional multiculturalism at least for two compelling reasons. Firstly (as demonstrated in the preceding section), the Zapatistas' pursuit of justice extends beyond cultural or symbolic concerns, encompassing socio-economic redistributive structures as well (Fraser 1997: 13-14). Secondly, the Zapatistas

problematise and radicalise the notion of multicultural identity as a 'person's understanding of who they are, [and] of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being' (Taylor 1994: 25). The Zapatistas do not conceive our identities shaped in the crucible of homogeneous cultures, but rather arising from complex processes of recognition founded upon dialogue with those who are different from us – a dialogue that inherently assumes the political obligation to attentively listen and strive to comprehend them.

The Zapatista model of a just society, in sum, rests upon a conception of justice grounded in two core political values: democracy and pluralism. The following pages will provide a concise exposition of the Zapatistas' approach to each of these foundational principles.

A. To command by obeying, or democracy as non-domination

The republican tradition draws a clear distinction between the concepts of power and domination. In its simplest sense, the term *power* refers to the capacity of an entity or individual to alter the fabric of reality (Villoro 2015: 44). *Domination*, in contrast, signifies the exercise of arbitrary power over fellow human beings (Pettit 2002: 52, Domènech Figueras 2004: 12-22). An act is considered arbitrary when it is solely based on the *arbitrium* – that is, the decision, judgment, or will – of an agent. Domination is therefore exercised at the dominating agents' pleasure, without tracking the interests or ideas of those subjected to their dominance (Pettit 2002: 55). Republicanism, however, seeks to structure the exercise of power in a manner that eliminates domination altogether. This involves removing all forms of social subordination within a community, thereby eliminating the strategic need for deferential submission to those in positions of authority. In a republic, the powerless can confidently look to the powerful in the eye (Pettit 2002: 71, Domènech Figueras 2004: 74-87). From a republican standpoint, democracy (broadly understood as a government of all the people, by all the people, and for all the people) (Arblaster 2002: 37-65, Díaz 1998: 142-153, Villoro 2015: 32-38) therefore demands constant

oversight of those who hold political power. Community members retain the right to hold them accountable for their actions and to depose them if they act in an arbitrary manner.

The Zapatista conception of democracy encompasses the fundamental normative elements of the republican tradition, while simultaneously enriching them with principles rooted in the Maya worldview. In February 1994, a few days prior to commencing negotiations with the federal government, the CCRI-CG (1994c: 175) published a communiqué that outlined the fundamental principles of EZLN's political philosophy regarding the exercise of power and their understanding of democracy. The communiqué refers to a time when the EZLN was 'a mere shadow moving through the fog and darkness of the mountains.' In those bleak days, when 'hatred and death' burgeoned in the hearts of Indigenous communities, 'the faceless ones, those who wander in the night, those who are the mountains' – all metaphorical references to the Zapatista guerrillas who conceal their individual identities beneath balaclavas – seized the opportunity to articulate their stance:

> Our path was always making the will of the many one with the hearts of the men and women who command. The will of the majority was the path on which they who command should walk. If they separate their step from the path of the will of the people, the heart who commands should be changed for another who obeys. Thus was born our strength in the jungle, they who command obey if they are true, and they who follow command through the common heart of true men and women. Another word came from afar so that this government was named, and this word gave the name of 'democracy' to our way that was from before the words travelled (CCRI-CG 1994c: 175-176).

June Nash (1997: 264) observes that the cadence of the speech and the imagery of the language mirror Mayan ceremonial poetics even in translation. The repeated references to a common path that is built across the heart of the community members and their leaders replicates the belief in a true language that is spoken from the heart – which is called, for example, '*batzil k'op*' among the Tzeltal and the Tzotzil, or *'tojol `ab'al*' among the Tojolabal. Traditional healers and

diviners feel the pulse in their patients to gain access to the deep truths that can only be expressed in this language. This is done by holding their thumb over the throbbing pulse in the wrist of the patient while uttering provocative questions. When the pulse leaps, the curers who are listening and feeling (the verb *awayi* is used for both actions) learn where the problem lies.

Republicanism presupposes a regime of civic virtue, under which citizens are willing to serve honestly the community, can commit themselves to the common good, and stand up for the defence of common liberty and rights (Pettit 2002: 245, Viroli 2003: 18-43). The Zapatistas add an extra dimension to republican civic virtues by emphasising the importance of being true (in Spanish, *verdadero*). This assertion is distinctly made, for example, in the 'Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle':

> Many words walk in the world. Many worlds are made. Many worlds make us. There are words and worlds that are lies and injustices. There are words and worlds that are truths and truthful. We make true worlds. We are made from true words. (CCRI-CG 1996: 89).

The actions of true men and women are coherent with their spoken word. In this regard, Carlos Lenkersdorf (1999: 22-23) explains that among the Tojolabal people, the term '*tojol*' refers to what is true, authentic, or genuine. For instance, a freshly made tortilla (*waj*) is considered '*tojol*' because it is at its optimal flavour and consistency. Tortillas, however, are not '*tojol*' all the time, but only in that precise moment when they are ready to fulfill their purpose. The same applies to human beings, who are '*tojol*' only when they do what is right and thus fulfill their human calling. '*Tojol*' is therefore not static, but defined each day, in each of our actions.

Acting with integrity is an endless process that is open to all human beings – though not everyone fulfills it on every occasion. '*Tojol*' leaders hence command the respect of the community because they are 'already in their hearts' (*`ayxa sk'ujol*), meaning they possess the necessary judgement to articulate the collective mindset regarding the appropriate course of action. Decision-making always remains within the purview

of the community, whose members perceive themselves as '*lajan lajan `aytik*' – that is, 'on par' (in Spanish, *parejos*) (Lenkersdorf 1992: 77-78). Those in positions of authority merely verbalise the community's decisions (Lenkersdorf 1992: 80). In this sense, all community members have a duty to participate in solving common problems, and those in authority have an obligation to listen to everyone. This reciprocity, as we will see next, is crucial in shaping the Zapatista conception of political pluralism.

B. On pluralism, or the pursuit of a world where many worlds fit

The process of *identification* entails the act of isolating and discerning an entity as a unique and discernible unit within a given temporal and spatial context, differentiating it from other entities. Charles Taylor (1994: 33-34) specifies *identity* in political terms by referring to 'who we are' and 'where we're coming from' and, as such, to 'the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense.' From this viewpoint, identity can be defined as the cognitive representation we possess of ourselves. Our identities could therefore be defined by culture, religion, nationality, gender, ethnicity, or virtually any other feature that defines our sense of self. The definition of our identity can lead to the temptation of excluding those who differ from us within the community. Consequently, the establishment of our identity requires normative mechanisms to prevent it from becoming an absolute prerequisite for public coexistence, even at the expense of coexistence itself (Thiebaut 1999: 49-56). Fundamental rights serve as a classic example of such normative mechanisms (Olivé 1999: 102-106). Consider, for instance, freedom of religion. Suppose that we disapprove of the religious beliefs held by our neighbours, which we deem too heterodox, even though they do not cause any harm to us. While we may be inclined to suppress these beliefs, the right to religious freedom presents a range of normative reasons to restrain or reject our initial inclination.

Pluralism precisely accounts for the existence of incompatible

worldviews or conceptual frameworks that, nonetheless, lead to correct beliefs or enable the accurate assessment of certain actions as morally acceptable. However, this pluralistic premise does not devolve into crass relativism, which indiscriminately regards all perspectives as equally valid or valuable. Not everything is equivalent, nor is everything permissible. Certain approaches to investigating reality or evaluating human actions offer greater reliability in generating genuine knowledge or constructing appropriate and coherent frameworks for assessing human conduct. This reliability stems from conceptual frameworks that more aptly align with the constraints imposed by reality itself, and normative frameworks – such as fundamental rights – that are grounded in criteria garnering strong consensus regarding their soundness and efficacy in realising coordinated actions and shared projects (Olivé 1999: 124).

On these grounds, no community or culture should assert superiority in the field of knowledge or morality to enable, through pluralism, exchanges or cooperation with other communities or cultures (Olivé 1999: 125). This is precisely the starting point of Zapatista pluralism. The Zapatistas demand recognition of their cultural difference within a normative framework that also recognises other cultures. While repeatedly denouncing the historical grievances suffered by Indigenous peoples at the hands of the Mexican nation, the Zapatistas have never excluded *mestizos* or other cultural or ethnic groups from their political project. This stance was explicitly articulated by Marcos to the French sociologist Yvon Le Bot:

> In the 'First Declaration' [of the Lacandon Jungle], the statement 'we are the product of 500 years of struggle' left no doubts about the Indigenous nature of the problem. During the Committee's deliberations on the 'First Declaration,' however, the comrades stressed the importance of clarifying that it was not solely a war fought by Indigenous people, but rather a national conflict. They said, 'We must ensure that non-Indigenous individuals feel included. Our call must be inclusive, for everyone' (Le Bot 1997: 167).

Lenkersdorf (28-35) asserts that the inherent linguistic structure

of the Maya language serves to foster intersubjective inclusivity. Maya is an ergative language (León Pasquel 2005: 202), requiring a plurality of subjects while excluding any reference to objects for the apprehension and description of some events. The English phrase 'I told you,' for example, translates into Maya as '*kala awab'yex*.' In English (or Spanish), this sentence consists of a transitive verb (to tell) and an indirect object (you) that passively receives the verbal action. In contrast, the Maya language combines the act of speaking (*ala*) with the active act of listening (*`ab'i*). The linguistic difference is evident. While English (or Spanish) implies a unilateral action through its verbal expression, Maya employs two verbs that encompass interdependent actions. This foundational reciprocity in dialogue is reflected in the political pluralism conceived by the CCRI-CG, as illustrated in the 'Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle:'

> In the world of the powerful there is no space for anyone but themselves and their servants. In the world we want, everyone fits.
>
> We want a world in which many worlds fit. The homeland that we build is one where all communities and languages fit, one where all steps may be walked, where all may have laughter, where all may live the dawn.
>
> We speak of unity even when we are silent. Softly and sprinkling we speak the words that find the unity that embraces us in history, and which will discard the abandonment that confronts and destroys us (CCRI-CG 1996: 89).

Marcos and Old Antonio, a recurring elderly Maya figure in his narratives, have played a pivotal role in fostering intercultural conceptual bridges that underpin the Zapatista vision of political pluralism.[15] In a story attached to a communiqué published by the CCRI-CG, for example, Marcos refers to Old Antonio's reinterpretation of the creation myths expounded in the *Popol Vuh*, the revered book that encapsulates the wisdom and traditions of Maya culture. According to Old Antonio's account, the first gods who brought the world into existence initially created golden people so that they would be 'very beautiful and last a long time' (Subcomandante Marcos 1994b: 240). However, due to

their weightiness that rendered them immobile and idle, the gods opted to create another lineage of wooden people. These wooden people were industrious and mobile. Yet, the golden people compelled their wooden fellows to bear their burdens and toil for them. Subsequently, the gods resolved to create the maize people, who represent the true men and women.

Old Antonio's story mirrors the mythical three stages of human creation found in the *Popol Vuh* (Vidal and Rivera 2017: 105-115 and 207-208). In the traditional myth, the primordial gods moulded human beings successively from mud, wood, and maize. There are, however, two significant differences between the *Popol Vuh* version and Old Antonio's account. Firstly, the replacement of mud people in the initial phase with gold people in Old Antonio's iteration stands out. Secondly, the gods destroyed the mud people and the wood people in the *Popol Vuh*, so the three types of people never coexisted. Old Antonio's account, on the contrary, features the simultaneous existence of gold, wood, and maize people. The Zapatista version of the myth thus weaves an allegory about the exploitation of Indigenous people by the non-Indigenous individuals in Mexico. The antagonism, however, is social rather than cultural or ethnic: the poor are exploited by the rich (Vanden Berghe 2005: 120-121). This relates to Zapatista demands for effective economic and social equality, which aim at structural changes addressing the material causes of discrimination and exclusion.

Old Antonio tells Marcos that the maize people 'spoke the true language to reach an agreement among themselves and then went to the mountain to try to create a good path for all people' (Subcomandante Marcos 1994b: 240). The maize people – the true ones, who are '*lajan lajan `aytik*' – are thus feared by the gold people and expected with hope by the wood people. The maize people embody the Zapatista utopia as they neither exploit others nor accept to be exploited. The high moral standards that inspire the maize people, however, are not limited solely to Indigenous individuals but extend to anyone who, like the Zapatistas, is willing to conceal their face and sacrifice themselves for the common good:

> I asked Old Antonio about the colour of the skin of the maize people, and he showed me different types of maize, with diverse colours, and told me that they had all skin tones, but nobody knew for sure because the maize people, the true men and women, are faceless (Subcomandante Marcos 1994b: 240).

Old Antonio concludes another story about the origin of colours by stating, 'the world will be joyful if all colours and all thoughts have their place' (Subcomandante Marcos 1994c: 114). This recurring motif resonates within the Zapatista narratives. Over a decade later, during a meeting in Magdalena de Kino, Sonora, with representatives of the Tohono O'odham, Navajo, and Cherokee peoples, Marcos voiced that, while some maize people have no heart, the maize-hearted people are of all colours:

> Our elders, our leaders, recount that the gods created the world, they made maize men and women first. And they precisely bestowed upon them maize hearts. But the maize ran out, and some men and women did not receive a heart. However, they also ran short of the colour of the earth, and they began to seek other colours, and thus people who are white, red, or yellow were bestowed with maize hearts. That is why there are people here who do not have the brown colour of Indigenous people, but they have a maize heart, and that is why they are with us (Subcomandante Marcos 2006).

In the world where other worlds fit, the virtue of justice is not predicated on culture or ethnicity, but rather on the willingness to treat those who are different from us as our equals. From this standpoint, the Zapatistas endeavoured to establish a legal framework for their political vision of inclusive pluralism by proposing reforms to Mexican federalism that would recognise Indigenous autonomies as a distinct tier of government alongside the federal, state, and municipal levels. The San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture (*Acuerdos de San Andrés sobre Derechos y Cultura Indígena*) thus encapsulate a comprehensive legal synthesis of Zapatista inclusive pluralism. The Mexican government committed in the Accords to address the demands of Indigenous communities through a constitutional amendment. Following the unsuccessful initial peace negotiations in

1994, subsequent talks leading to the Accords took place between 1995 and 1996 in the town of San Andrés Larráinzar, which the Zapatistas renamed as San Andrés Sakamch'en de los Pobres.

The Accords charted a new relation between the state and Indigenous peoples throughout Mexico, requiring changes in juridical and political practices at state and national levels. These included the recognition of the right to self-determination within a constitutional framework of Indigenous autonomy; their right to multicultural education (including teaching in their own languages); representation in local and national congresses; and recognition of the right of Indigenous peoples to the collective use and enjoyment of the natural resources found on their lands and territories (Hernández Navarro y Verra Herra 1998: 67-95).[16]

The Accords were simply too good to become law. Late in 1996, then President Ernesto Zedillo vetoed a bill on the implementation of the Accords that had been prepared by the Concord and Pacification Commission (*Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación*, COCOPA), which was integrated by a plural group of lawmakers representing all major Mexican political parties. Zedillo's successor, Vicente Fox, re-introduced the bill before the Mexican Congress in December 2000. The Zapatistas demanded the bill to be passed without change. This demand, however, was not met. The rights to self-determination and to the use and enjoyment of natural resources were gutted from the constitutional amendment finally approved by the Mexican Congress. As a result, the Zapatistas rejected any further negotiation with the Mexican government until the Accords are truly fulfilled.

5 Conclusion (which is disguised as an epilogue): the resilience of rebel dignity

After all possibility of dialogue with the Mexican government was closed off, the Zapatistas withdrew to the areas they controlled in Chiapas and, from 2003 until 2023 (without asking permission to do so), established a democratic form of government that responded to the principles described in these pages. This governance structure, known as the Good Government Boards (*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, JBG),

comprised representatives from the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities (*Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas*, MAREZ). JBG representatives were elected by the entire community, independently from the Mexican state. The representatives served on a rotational basis, their positions were subject to recall, and they were accountable through regular reporting (Villoro 2015: 28-29).

For two decades, the MAREZ stood as testimony to the perseverance of Zapatistas. Travelers venturing into these regions encountered signs alerting them to the unique political landscape, where the people rule, and the government obeys.

(Figure 1: Massa 2004)

[You are in Zapatista territory in rebellion. Here the people rule, and the government obeys.]

This article refers to a brief period when utopia seemed possible in southeast Mexico. At the time of writing, headlines in Mexico report that the scourge of the drug wars has infiltrated Zapatista territory (Mandujano 2023). This violence, which afflicts all Mexicans, has not excluded the Zapatistas from its deadly embrace. On November 12, 2023, the EZLN announced the dissolution of the JGB and their replacement with flexible military-like structures. These changes aim to enable its members to confront the criminal organizations that have proliferated in recent years in the Lacandon Jungle and along the border between Mexico and Guatemala (Subcomandante Moisés 2023).

Nonetheless, the Zapatistas still offer Mexicans – and anyone willing to listen – the remedy against this and other forms of violence. In a 2011 letter addressed to Mexican philosopher Luis Villoro (2015: 84), Marcos points out that the struggle that truly matters is the one we wage 'to cease being what we are now and to become what we should be [...] because we recognize the Other who, in other lands of Mexico and the world, and without being identical to us, suffers the same pains, sustains similar resistances, fights for a manifold identity that does not override, subjugate, or conquer, and longs for a world without armies.' I believe this will always be a noble utopian vision within our grasp, if only we had the courage to pursue it: to live by the simple principle of accepting human diversity without attempting to eradicate it in the process.

End Notes

1 Luis Gómez Romero migrated from Mexico to Australia in June 2013 to join the School of Law at the University of Wollongong, where he is currently a Senior Lecturer in Jurisprudence and Human Rights, and a member at the Legal Intersections Research Centre. His latest publication is the play script *Twenty Minutes with the Devil*, co-authored with Desmond Manderson.

2 All unattributed translations are mine.

3 I employ the term 'Indigenous' in reference to the Zapatistas since they mostly self-identify using it.

4 On May 25, 2014, Marcos announced his transformation into Galeano in a ceremony paying tribute to Zapatista militant José Luis Solís, who had adopted the pseudonym 'Galeano' as an homage to the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano. Solís was tragically killed during a confrontation with an organisation that had longstanding conflicts with the Zapatistas. The persona of Marcos explained his own demise at the commemorative event. 'We believe,' he said, 'that it is necessary for one of us to die so that Galeano may live [...] for Galeano to live and for death to take not a life, but only a name [...] Therefore, we have decided that Marcos ceases to exist today' (Subcomandante Marcos and Subcomandante Galeano 2014). On October 29, 2023, however, Marcos introduced a new turn in his many lives by proclaiming his resurrection – though demoted from Subcommander (*Subcomandante*) to Captain (*Capitán*) in the EZLN ranks – after declaring the passing of 'Galeano' (Capitán Insurgente Marcos 2023) I will therefore utilize the names 'Marcos' or 'Galeano' depending on the pseudonym employed by the author to sign the referenced text.

5 The Zapatistas have issued a total of six 'Declarations from the Lacandon Jungle' to date, specifically in January and June of 1994, January of 1995, January of 1996, July of 1998, and June of 2005.

6 Storytelling is central to the Zapatista methods of political analysis, critique, and action. See Subcomandante Galeano (2015a and 2015 b) and Vanden Berghe (2005).

7 The PRI was originally established as the National Revolutionary Party (*Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, PNR) in 1929. The PNR eventually reorganised into the Mexican Revolutionary Party (*Partido de la Revolución Mexicana*, PRM) in 1938, which finally became the PRI in 1946. For an

introduction to the historical evolution of this political party, as well as the role it played in shaping contemporary Mexico, see Hernández Rodríguez (2016).

8 For an introduction to the complex background, causes, processes, and consequences of the Mexican Revolution, see Silva Herzog (2010a and 2010b).

9 Estimates on the size of Mexico's population on the eve of the Spanish conquest range from 4.5 million to 30 million. A relentless string of epidemics and famine, which were in part caused by the violence of the conquest wars and the ruthless colonial reorganisation of labour, left by the early years of the 17th century a population of only about one million natives (Lomnitz 2005: 67-72).

10 At that time, five geopolitical entities coexisted in the Iberian Peninsula: The Kingdom of Portugal, the Kingdom of Castile, the Kingdom of Aragon, the Kingdom of Navarra, and the Emirate of Granada.

11 Some authors, such as Ignacio Martínez (2017), inaccurately describe New Spain as a settler colonial enterprise. Settler colonialism aims to eradicate its own enabling conditions by eliminating Indigenous populations and replacing them with a settler society (Veracini 2010: 20-24). This was not the case with the Spanish Crown, which, as noted by Enrique Semo (1986: 66-67), developed a colonial regime of tributary despotism. Its vast American possessions indeed became new tributary kingdoms that were incorporated into the existing ones in the Iberian Peninsula during the early 16th century.

12 The expression 'system breakdown' (*caída del sistema*) became ever since a Mexican shorthand for an implausible excuse.

13 On Chiapas' social, economic, and political situation at the time of the Zapatista insurrection, see Harvey (1995).

14 In Chiapas, both the humanistic efforts of the Catholic friars in the colonial reordering of Indigenous communities and the egalitarian impact of the Mexican Revolution had notably constrained effects (De Vos 1997: 105-156, García de León 1993: II: 14-152, Viqueira 1995: 220-228).

15 Marcos has consistently identified himself as a disciple of Old Antonio. In the interview with Yvon Le Bot (1997: 134), for instance, he stated, 'Old Antonio is the bridge [...] his fundamental contribution is to help the Zapatistas understand the specificity of the Indigenous issue in the

mountains of south-eastern Mexico [...] It is Old Antonio who provides the Indigenous elements that are present in the Zapatista language when they communicate with the outside world.'

16 On the international law framework supporting the Zapatista demands related to communal lands and natural resources in their territory, see Montalván and Wences 2022.

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