

Gustavo Esteva

**CRAFTING A PLACE IN SPACE:
EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE'S REGENERATION**

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By GUSTAVO ESTEVA

The Tepoztecos' struggle

For several decades I occasionally visited friends in Tepoztlán. During the last five years I often stayed there for days or weeks, visiting friends and family, and became involved as an external observer and participant in the local struggle. I was invited to participate in some of their local debates and fora. My writings on their struggle, published in national newspapers, were used by them in different ways.

The Tepoztecos did not use the word 'identity' during the course of their struggle. In resisting specific 'developments' or developers, they were both protecting their place and affirming their own definition of the good life.

The elders of Tepoztlán are recognized keepers of internal norms and rituals. They also conduct the process of changing them. Some changes in their normative system and their definition of the good life require an explicit decision, taken autonomously in assemblies of the *barrios* and agencies of Tepoztlán. Other changes start as a personal initiative, followed by others and, in time, become generalized behavior within the community.

When the 'development' described in the first paper started, some people of Tepoztlán, including the Municipal President, perceived it as business as usual and facilitated its implementation. A rumour then started in the town. People began to discuss the issue at home, in the cantina, everywhere. At some point, it was brought to the assemblies and a communal conflict became evident: a minority for, a majority against.

Within months the conflict became very intense and many people and organizations -local, regional, national and even international- involved themselves in the struggle, taking sides. But all important decisions were taken by the local people, through their usual procedures, and implied the participation of most inhabitants.

In the course of the struggle, the internal consensus about its meaning (to protect Tepoztlán's autonomy from private and public developers) became very strong. There were many internal disputes about tactics, about the ways and means of the struggle, and about the relations with outsiders, authorities and allies, but not about what was at stake. Some members of the community became prominent and even leaders or 'heroes' in the course of the struggle; one was killed by the State police and a few went to jail. They played a very important role in the articulation of the collective effort, but they were not contributing to the creation or revitalization of local identity. At the end of the struggle, they returned to their usual activities. They had the

recognition of the people, a prestige that will last for years, but not a position of power. None of them became an authority in the next term, when the Tepoztecos recovered full political control of the town.

The meaning of the struggle was evident for most people in Tepoztlán. Even those supporting the 'development' in question, particularly in the initial stages, did share the same notion of identity, but assumed that people's life could be improved with the 'development'. For it implied, for them, 'progress' without cultural dissolution.

The key actors in the struggle against the 'development', that is, the Tepoztecos themselves, were not trying to achieve "better development and democracy". They were affirming themselves in their own notion of the good life, which included a specific form of self-government. They were resisting an initiative from the outside -corporate capital and the State and Federal government- asking them to surrender their autonomy, the autonomous control of their own way of life, in exchange for some of the 'goodies' of development: jobs, equipment, services...

The strong identity of the Tepoztecos, expressed both in their daily lives and their resistance to 'development' and 'democracy', helps them to carry on their dignified way of life. They introduce interesting innovations -technical or sociological- or incorporate in their own terms practices or technologies coming from outside, to enrich their own way. But they do it autonomously, in their own terms.

It seems that the Tepoztecos are using a wise combination of resistance, innovation or accomodation to outside challenges for continually enriching their local culture and identity.

The construction of Zapatismo

Since January 1994 I was involved in a variety of efforts of the 'civil society' to support the Zapatistas. I published a book on them a few months later. In November, 1994, invited by local organizations, I became the presiding judge of a People's Court conducting a trial against the government of Chiapas, after the fraudulent election of a new governor -who was forced to resign a few days after taking office. In 1995 I was invited to be an advisor to the Zapatistas for their negotiations with the government. Since 1996 I have been part of the Zapatista Front for National Liberation. I have also been an active participant in many of the initiatives of the Zapatistas. In Oaxaca I have also been an active participant and even a key actor in recent struggles.

An impressive diversity of actors played an important role in the creation or revitalization of local identity in Mexico, during the last 20 years. Armchair, deprofessionalized, organic or incarnated intellectuals; grassroots activists; artists; social and political organizations; a highly heterogenous array of people were supporting or articulating people's initiatives to create a place in the abstract space constructed by the market or the State.

A severe earthquake in Mexico City, in 1985, gave immediate visibility to such social movement, expressing the autonomy of wide groups well rooted in their places and continually affirming, creating and revitalizing their own local identity.

In the 1980s and the early 1990s, especially in the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the 'discovery' of America, the local, cultural identity of Indian peoples also got more visibility. Some key actors, like Bishop Samuel Ruiz in Chiapas, played an important role in the process: by giving social recognition to that identity, by celebrating it, explicitly opposing its continual devaluation and dismantling, they contributed to its revitalization.

In 1983 three non-indigenous revolutionaries joined forces with three indigenous ones to plant in Selva Lacandona, in Chiapas, the seeds of a guerrilla. They were carrying with them the ideological baggage of Latin American guerrillas, with some intellectual actualization. After a year of survival in the jungle, they were 12: 11 indigenous and one non-indigenous (who later was known as subcomandante Marcos). They thus started their contacts with people of local communities and a difficult dialogue began.

"Your word is too hard", people were telling them. They could not follow the ideological discourse of the revolutionaries. After months of an effort to educate the people in their ideology and political plans, the would-be guerrilleros began to listen to them. "In the confrontation of ideas", they confessed later, "we lost. And something new was born: Zapatismo". This movement was no longer embedded in any form of marxism-leninism. But neither was it the expression of the traditional resistance of indigenous peoples, entrenched in their communities, finding a refuge for their local identity in their oppressed isolation or their traditional rebellions against the oppressors. Well rooted in their tradition, explicitly affirming that identity, it was also open to others, to the world.

The uprising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), on January 1st., 1994, attracted immediate attention and played a very important role in the revitalization of local identity everywhere --within Mexico as well as abroad. On the one side, it gave visibility and legitimacy to the movement already in place. On the other side, it inspired and activated many people involved in their own local struggles and broke their isolation or disarticulation. It has been, since then, a continual source of inspiration and a necessary reference for many local struggles.

Zapatismo does not fit well in any of the categories or classes of 'old' or 'new' social movements. It is a living being, changing continually and involving an amazing diversity of persons, groups and peoples. It is not defined by a specific ideology or doctrine. As I explained in the first paper, it is not a guerrilla or a fundamentalist, nationalist or ethnic movement. The EZLN plays a key role in Zapatismo, continually nourishing it with its creative and audacious initiatives. Zapatismo itself, however, cannot be **reduced** to the EZLN.

Zapatismo expresses and articulates a wide movement of diverse groups of people -even those that do not recognize themselves as Zapatistas or refuse any affiliation with Zapatismo. They are affirming themselves in their local places, which they are courageously crafting in the shapeless spaces imposed by the market or the State.

The government and many outsiders assume that the person known as subcomandante Marcos is the leader of the EZLN and Zapatismo. But he is not. It is impossible to know, for the time being, if he played or not an important role in the revitalization of the identity of the indigenous peoples who organized the EZLN and are keeping it alive. Most probably, he was able to give to it specific articulation, through some symbols and words. It was thus possible to share the meaning and shape of that identity with others, who in time identified themselves with the political and cultural position of the Zapatistas. Such articulation cannot be described either as an ideology or an abstract construction: for at its very core it retains its concreteness. In identifying common "no's" (rejections) of the discontents with the world as it is (development, capitalism, globalization...), it keeps room open for a wide variety of "yes's" -those emanating from local identities and expressing them.

Zapatismo itself, or its key actors, can not be associated with the achievement of any form of conventional or alternative development. The word rarely appears in the conversation or the discourse of the people involved in the movement. They have explicitly rejected, time and again, the position of the government and many experts, who attributed the root-cause of the uprising or the movement itself to lack of development, to underdevelopment, to marginalization.

Zapatismo implies a radical rejection of any universal definition of the good life, even when it comes packaged as local or endogenous development, basic needs or universal human rights. Zapatismo left behind the old ideological construction of progress and its contemporary variants of development and globalization. People's struggles and initiatives to cope with their own predicaments and restrictions and enrich their own, differentiated definition of the good life, in their own places, is not "local development".

Zapatismo firmly advocates democracy, while being the most radical critic of formal or representative democracy. It can accept democratic elections, particularly for the transition to a really democratic society: in denouncing and struggling against the vicious procedures used by an authoritarian regime in the electoral process, or in participating in it in spite of its distortions, Zapatismo does not surrender itself to the democratic illusion -for the reasons exposed in the first paper.

Zapatismo struggles for radical democracy, for people's power: a social order in which people can have and exert their power, in the appropriate, local political bodies. In such a context, the very notion of political power radically changes.

Zapatismo does not confine itself to people's places, where it means freedom and conviviality, as well as a proportionate and humane way to deal with conflicts, contradictions, oppression. It also promotes juridical and political procedures, in order to generate social consensus among *los diferentes*¹, among the peoples and communities coexisting in the national society, in order that they come to coexist in harmony, through accords constructed in the context of an intercultural dialogue.

Zapatismo does not deny the legitimacy of the conflict of interests; in fact it explicitly and implicitly recognizes the internal differences and contradictions within communities. But it does not pretend to deal with them at an abstract level, through a professional structure supposedly based in the principles of equality and representation and in the myth of homogeneous, abstract individuals whose formal contract establishes the social order and its institutions.

The Zapatista uprising clearly expressed a rebellion against all forms of exclusive homogenization, applied in the name of whatever ideology, religion, or belief, and implemented in economic, social, political or cultural terms. In saying that the options of the world, at the beginning of the new millenium, can be symbolized by Kosovo and Chiapas, the Zapatistas explicitly exposed their position about the relations between *los diferentes*.

"Globalization", observed subcomandante Marcos, "has accentuated and polarized the differences. It has multiplied national boundaries and pulverized the existing ones. It has also multiplied the wars, that is, the use of violence for the confrontation between *los diferentes*. The difference, we say, necessarily defines the future of the world. This is the time of *los diferentes*... At the end of the century, there are two forms to process those differences: that of Kosovo, through violence, fundamentalism, ethnic cleansing, the discretion of both parties -OTAN and Milosevic: one imposing ethnic purity by force and one "saving the humanity" by bombing hospitals and the Chinese Embassy. This is one of the options proposed by the globalization of the world. The other is a different form for recognizing *los diferentes*, proposed by the Zapatistas... What the Zapatismo says is that, if we are different, we will not impose our difference upon any one but no one should impose on us their difference... The problem is how to live together without eliminating the differences -between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, men, women, homosexuals... whatever aspect in which the 'other' appears in a society. How they can live together without renouncing to be what they are and at the same time respecting the other" (El Día, May 6, 1999).

In affirming local, cultural identity, Zapatismo struggles against every and all forms of intolerance. But it does not look only for tolerance. It is better than intolerance, but only its most civilized form. For to tolerate the other implies suffering with patience his-her very existence or generously accepting it. This attitude of tolerance creates tensions that may evolve to the power game of

¹ Those that are different...whether in their skin color, sexual preferences, political philosophies or whatever.

hegemony; in time, reestablishes forms of intolerance. Zapatismo looks, beyond tolerance, for hospitality, a dignified attitude in which the affirmation of your own identity -your difference- is embedded in profound respect for the other: it is openness to the otherness of the Other. It rejects any form of universalism (even about sexual preferences), but also cultural relativism, which all too often slips down the slippery slope towards fundamentalism. It affirms itself in radical pluralism. As the Zapatistas say, the current challenge is to create "a world in which many worlds can fit."

Beyond development and democracy

I don't see any version or form of development, neither "green", "alternative" nor "conventional" emerging from the local practices I am reporting.

People are continually dealing with the pressures of private, public and non-governmental developers, urging them to adopt the ideas and practices of development in conventional or alternative forms. Globalization has intensified those pressures: the 'development' threatening Tepoztlán was clearly conceived as a transnational operation; the Zapatista uprising started the day in which the North American Free Trade Agreement entered into force. At the same time, it has created many opportunities, by transforming millions of people into disposable human beings. Perhaps capital has more appetite than ever, but it has not, at least for the time being and for many years ahead, enough stomach to digest all those millions. It cannot absorb them, as salaried workers; and is increasingly blocking their access to the globalized markets, where they can no longer sell their products. This situation is imposing severe hardships upon many peoples, particularly those used to get a pay-check or an income derived from the sale of their products in the abstract market. But, at the same time, it is creating opportunities for existing beyond the logic of capital, in their own places. People are thus taking post-economic initiatives, initiatives that are no longer organized under the premise of scarcity (the relation between limited means and unlimited ends). They are recovering or recreating their own ways for eating, learning, healing, settling, exchanging; their own ways of living, without the intermediation of capital or putting in their margin their unavoidable dealings with it.

In the epic now evolving at the grassroots, illustrated in the cases I am reporting, there is always a tension between those courageously affirming their own path and those, among themselves, who have already surrendered to development, in whatever form. People's "intimate enemy" (Nandy) corrodes from within local culture and identity. Some tepoztecos and tepoztizos, including the local authorities, operated as allies of the developers: they considered that the resistance to the 'development' they were helping to implement was either expression of ignorance and blind, parochial traditionalism, or a plot of local opportunists of the political opposition. Many allies of the Zapatistas, including an army of do-gooders and revolutionary tourists (coming for a Zapatour), have been anxiously offering to the communities many of the 'goodies' of development.

Democrats of every kind, many of whom have been courageously struggling for several years against the authoritarian political regime, in order to bring 'modern' democracy to the country, observe with suspicion or confusion the claims of Zapatismo. Some of them openly support the Zapatistas, both in their struggle against the government and their efforts to remedy their oppression and predicaments. They also support their claim for autonomy, but they attempt to limit or reduce it in order to accommodate it into the political design of the nation-state and formal democracy. They consider that their conceptions may create patrimonialist enclaves (for example in the form of the American reservations for indigenous peoples), localized ethnic fundamentalisms or communitarian fragmentation. They concentrate their effort in promoting full citizenship; some of them postulate forms of "ethnic citizenship" as a compromise.

There is a clear communitarist impulse in Zapatismo. There seems to be in it the implicit conviction that the future will be, one way or the other, a communitarian reality: that the community will be the main political form of a new social order.

This position does not postulate that the community is a kind of paradise. In the case of women, for example, it recognizes without reservation that they suffer, in the already existing communities, a compounded oppression of traditional patriarchy and modern sexism. That is why Zapatismo has placed gender, from the very beginning, at the center of the very definition of itself. Zapatismo does not perceive gender as another issue, to be included among a collection of claims. It assumes gender in all its scope, fully aware of the profundity of the transformations needed. And it addresses with imagination and courage the immense difficulties and resistance that such transformations bring with them, including what has started to be called the "feminization of politics".

To recognize that a good part of the current conflicts and contradictions have been created or stimulated by external forces and are a clear outcome of colonization and development, does not imply ignoring the internal conditions that generate and maintain many others, often promoted in the name of tradition or identity notions. The communitarianism of Zapatismo merely assumes that such conflicts and contradictions can be effectively solved only if the political bodies have a human scale and proportion; if real, ordinary men and women, can effectively act within those bodies in order to keep harmony and cohesion in the community, through an effective struggle against all forms of oppression, exploitation, domination or inequality.

This communitarianism tends to dissolve all forms of localism. Its inherent hospitality towards the other is rooted in the central assumption that the affirmation of the difference is always the expression of a social relation. To affirm the autonomy of the communities is thus, at the same time, to affirm a respectful, democratic mechanism to establish the norms regulating the relations between them.

Such a democratic mechanism does not imply dissolving citizenship; instead, it relativizes it. Zapatismo resists the reduction of real men and women, knots in nets of enfolded relations, to the

condition of homogeneous individuals, mere atoms of abstract categories. It opposes the assumption that the foundation of the social order should be this individualistic and statistical reduction, which becomes, in the realm of formal democracy, a sociological tool for the legitimation of the State as a structure of domination, based on the myth of representation.

Resorting to juridical and political procedures,² without the reductionism of formal democracy, is an attempt to create in the national society conditions allowing the people to exert their power, without betraying its nature and modes of operation. The idea is to forge social consensus through intercultural dialogues. These are not reduced to mere encounters between *los diferentes*. Rather, these attempt to transcend the logos (to transcend the assumption of universal reason), in order to construct accords that do not establish apparatuses of control, but really democratic institutions.

Globalization can be seen as the historical attempt of greatest scope to homogenize all human beings, in terms of a conceptual system and a way of life which are now hegemonic. However, "globalization is not homogenizing. What it is doing is to undress even more the difference, and even producing the multiplication and confrontation of those differences...for one to dominate the other through violent means" (subcomandante Marcos, El Día, May 26, 1999).

The effective homogenization of the hegemonic way of life is as impossible as it is undesirable: the patterns of behavior and consumption of 15% of the population, which consumes 80% of the resources of the planet, cannot be extended. Since the existence of real limits does not stop the globalizing impulse and its inherent homogenization, it reveals and continually accentuates the differences, which emerge in a great variety of forms. True, corporate globalization tends to dissolve national frontiers. These are now perceived as obstacles for its operation. Still, its real effect does not consist in the liquidation of the arbitrary construction of the nation-states, in order to articulate in a more sensible way the relations between real peoples and cultures. Instead, the real effect is the multiplication of frontiers which exacerbate the differences, as the Yugoslavian case clearly illustrates.

In stark contrast, the Chiapas proposed option implies a radical challenge to all forms of homogenization. It affirms diversity as a necessary assumption for harmony among persons and peoples. It rejects the very existence of "cultural universals" (Pannikar). It similarly rejects the predominance of the economic sphere, disembedded from culture and society. It advances in the construction of post-economic forms of social existence.

In Oaxaca, the Indian peoples have been coining new terms to build bridges towards others, in order to define conditions for mutual respect. Concepts like *comunalidad* or *comunalicracia* (Martínez Luna) had the function of both affirming and consolidating what they have in the communities. At the same time, it defines for others what they are looking for, thus eliminating

² **Juridical and political procedures are embedded one in the other. Together, they constitute the structure of freedom. (Illich).**

from it any sense of threat, while facilitating the process of weaving the necessary accords.

The Agreements of San Andrés, signed in February 1996 between the EZLN and the government, illustrate the meaning and scope of the current political struggle. They established the basis of a constitutional reform, whose terms were accepted by all the political parties represented in the Congress, to give an inclusive and hospitable shape to the design of the political regime. It was a decisive step, although insufficient, in the appropriate direction. It represented, among other things, the opportunity to bring peace to Chiapas, demilitarize the state and the country, and pave the way for a really democratic political process.

The authoritarian shortsightedness of the government prevented it from honoring its word and its signature. It refused since then to enforce the Agreements, with arguments and manoeuvring that revealed racism, intolerance and clumsiness. The real nature of its position became evident with the opposite evolution in Oaxaca. Both the political process which enable the enactment of the new Law for the Indigenous Communities and Peoples of Oaxaca, and its content, exhibited the feasibility of enforcing what was agreed upon in San Andrés, without "balkanizing" the country or propitiating ethnic confrontations.

Oaxaca's new legislation reveals the measure in which an open communitarianism, which affirms full autonomy of the communities, is entirely compatible with a harmonic social order, based in respect of *los diferentes*. Of course, a local law, enacted after a circumstantial political agreement, is a weak frame to conduct the profound transformation it implies. When a new governor was imposed by the President, the local balance of forces changed. During the last two years, the authorities have been resisting the enforcement of the new law: in fact, the Executive, the Legislative, and the Judiciary Powers of the state have been openly violating the new law, exerting again all forms of intolerance. In spite of that adverse context, the peoples and communities of Oaxaca persist in their struggle for autonomy, continually resorting to the political and juridical procedures.

In Oaxaca, as in the whole country, the social majorities are suffering immense restrictions and severe predicaments. Without the strength and firmness of their local identity, without their capacity to continue defining what the good life is for themselves and without their communitarian social fabric -even in the enormous urban settlements- they would be clearly doomed to extinction. With all those blessings, they are nourishing their hopes and their initiatives for the construction of a new society.