

MAKING OTHER WORLDS POSSIBLE:

WHY THE **ZAPATISTAS**
MATTER TO US

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The Gira brings delegations from the EZLN, the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) and the Front for the Defence of the Land and Water of Morelos, Puebla and Tlaxcala to Slumil K'ajxemk'op, the “Rebel Land” or “Land that doesn’t surrender” – the continent previously known as Europe.

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This text does not in any way represent the views of the Irish organising group.

1. Showing our compañeroas around: looking out over Dublin together

There were people here before the last ice swept everything clean.

The first to return afterwards, our earliest ancestors, were dark-skinned and blue-eyed with curly hair. They left flints, and a shell midden, on that island at the edge of the bay, and fish traps in a lake to the north.

From the train station here, you can see a tomb built by the first farmers on top of the hills overlooking the city. There are many monuments like it: looking west across the plains, gazing into the oncoming weather, surrounded today by the bog that grew when they cut down the trees and the water soaked the hills.

Our ancient legends are not of a people born here, but of wave after wave of invaders, the many “takings of Ireland”, one strange group of beings coming after another, then the People of the Goddess Danaan – the old

gods or “good people” who live in the tombs – and then the Celts who told those tales.

Our newer myths tell a similar story: one of many invasions, by Vikings, Normans and English who went on to become “more Irish than the Irish themselves”. If we must have myths, these are not bad ones: many people have come to these shores, in the time of legends and the time of chronicles, and over time they have become part of what it means to be Irish. That story has not finished.

Like most of our cities, this one was founded not by Celts but by Vikings, around a ridge where a small river flowed into a bigger one. The castle garden here, with children playing, lies where their ships once rested in the “black pool”, Dublin’s *dubh linn*.

Walk through its streets: in the placenames and then the buildings, you can see the marks of conquest and reconquest, wars of religion and rebellions, plantations.

This was one of the first sites of modern Empire, a place of colonisation and resistance, of collusion and uprisings.

Running through those hills just south of the city are the military road and the chain of barracks built after the last

great peasant uprising in 1798 – part of the same wave of revolutions as the Haitian uprising against slavery and the French Revolution. There is a mass rebel grave in the city, in front of the museum.

Rural elites sent evidence of agrarian “outrages” to the castle here: the anonymous letters and proclamations that the rural poor used to stop the wealthy (Catholic and Protestant alike) from raising rents and evicting them. Those letters are some of the first voices we have from ordinary Irish people¹.

Half a century after the uprising, the peasants starved when blight killed the crops and the government refused aid. I once lived in a building that had been a tiny workhouse for those who were fed as a form of workfare, in a western townland whose population is now a quarter of what it was before the Famine. An older woman once told me her childhood memory of meeting a very old woman who remembered the black slime in the bucket that should have been food. Walk through the

¹ Dunne, Terry. 2014. *Cultures of Resistance in pre-Famine Ireland*. PhD thesis, Maynooth University. <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/9126/>

countryside and you are walking through a landscape of ghosts.

The trains came from the desperate western villages, through this station with its view of the hills and on into the city, where the migrant poor lived in slums, whole families in half of what had once been a dining room. They sought dock work or sex work², joined the British army to export Empire to Asia and Africa, or left for the factories of England or America. Our crisis, exported, became British Army bayonets, Catholic missions, American police departments, and part of everyone else's crisis.

And yet, a generation after the Famine, the peasants fought back and won the land for themselves. As in France, the aristocratic landlord class almost vanished, and tenants became small farmers. They went on to make a world in their own image: erecting Catholic churches to heaven to match the colonisers' Protestant ones and building religious-run schools, hospitals, homes where

² Fagan, Terry. 2020. *Monto*. North Inner City Folklore Group, Dublin.

unmarried mothers saw their children forcibly adopted, industrial schools for the working-class poor, laundries for “fallen women”.

The walls of one of those laundries still stand in the city: but the real relics lie inside our hearts, in a million stories of sexual abuse and violence; of young women who had no idea what sex was but were incarcerated for behaving badly, or bartered in arranged marriages for land or respectability; stories of families who arranged or could not prevent their daughters’ incarceration; of a society that deferred to the priestly caste; of babies stolen from their mothers; and of people today struggling to find their parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters.

Just down the coast, a different kind of resistance story: a young man who left school at 12, worked his way around the world as a sailor and hobo, arrived in Asia and recognised the same kind of oppression, became a Buddhist monk to stand with local people against the

missionaries of Empire and an anti-colonial activist across a dozen countries in as many years³.

Back in the city, the dockworkers organised and joined the union. They were defeated by employers and police, with the help of the church and middle-class nationalists. Here is the alley-way where workers were cornered by police and beaten to the ground. It runs down the side of the post office where three years later the world's first working-class militia raised the flag of revolt against Empire – in alliance with those same middle-class nationalists.

We ended up with a property-ridden society, a divided island, a carceral Catholicism and punitive Protestantisms, exporting our own racism and ignorance as well, at times, as our spirit of rebellion.

Our 1916 Rising, and the state that eventually came out of it, was part of the same wave around the world as the first Zapatistas and the Mexican Revolution, and with

³ Turner, Alicia, Laurence Cox, Brian Bocking. 2020. *The Irish Buddhist: the Forgotten Monk who Faced Down the British Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

some of the same tensions. The wave of land occupations and working-class Soviets across Europe ebbed, leaving only a state that called itself a Soviet Union. The Indian Ghadar and the 1919 Egyptian revolution are both part of this same attempt to make a better world.

Do Mexican cities also have boring statues like the one we are walking past now, honouring the figures of your revolution while the state represses the struggles of the poor? Statues that tell us revolution is safely in the past and Not At All Interesting in the present?

Still today, our movements invoke the “real meaning of 1916”, and we speak through James Connolly’s moustache to name the distance between what was meant and what happened, between what we need and what we have, between the official story and the daily reality.

Walk through Dublin with us, or look out over it, and you can see all of this past here, just as it is anywhere. We could have this same conversation over a map of the whole island, or this rebel continent, or the whole troubled planet. And we know that each other’s places

have just as many layers of loss and struggle, hope and creation, mistakes and possibilities as our own.

None of us can think about our struggles and ignore where they come from, in history and in place, in our communities and our ideas, in our ways of organising and what we think we have learned through our history: that would be childish. But to let ourselves be trapped by that sense of what is easily possible would be a mistake of another kind.

This is part of why we respond when you call yourself after those who fought with Zapata, but create a new language for today.

2. Looking beyond the capitalist horizon: why the Zapatistas matter

Around the globe, social movements and communities in struggle are caught within the limitations of the world we have made. After the vast sense of possibility that came with the struggles against European empires and against fascism, for the right to vote and legal equality for women, against dictatorships and for state provision, against apartheid and racism and for LGBTQ+ rights, after one wave of revolutions after another ... we have lowered our gaze to where we can no longer see beyond the skyscrapers, the slums and the fields we know. Our utopias are Lego models, our visions are painted by numbers, our brave goals of systemic change are not matched by any capacity to act beyond the immediate.

We are in very different situations – migrant workers in China or refugees in Europe, human rights activists in India or North Americans confronting the police – but almost all of us are caught by the facts of our specific histories so far. What we can see and respond to is the

world we have made, the results of our past struggles and defeats, the orange glow of city lights, the haze of pollution and the horizon constructed by power and money.

This material and social reality comes from the given-ness of neoliberalism itself: the deliberate processes of isolating us from one another, fragmenting the relationships of mutual support and the collectivities of struggle - but also the dismantling of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century stories of shared projects to remake the world, as nations or democracies, as developmentalist, socialist or welfare states, the idea of an economic or cultural project of conscious change. Of course we cannot simply go backwards into the projects that brought us to this unexpected future; but in most parts of the world, most people are now left without the vessels that they entrusted their hopes for a better world to. Meanwhile, billionaires leave the planet and their satellites obscure the stars, while most of us are left in the decaying shadows of whatever projects existed where we happen to be.

Zapatismo helps us to hear the echoes of a wider potential, to have a bigger sense of what is possible than

what our local stories currently tell us: to imagine what we can do to remake where we are, together with others. The whispers that reach us from the Lacandon jungle help us face the ghosts of our own defeated revolutions – but also to face the self-inflicted defeats when our past projects have disappointed us, have turned into forces of exploitation and oppression, have come to mean something other than what their authors hoped for. They remind us of the better, other worlds that those projects spoke from, or aimed towards, and ask us what we are going to do now.

To say all this is not to turn our backs on past struggles but to acknowledge that they were difficult attempts to change the world, made in conditions they did not want, whose participants often argued about what to do – and without the benefit of hindsight. We now know that national independence, popular decision-making, mass education, welfare provision, the end of legal discriminations, or even a nominally socialist state, do not mean as much as most people who made them often hoped. To recognise these disappointments is not to reject the achievements of past struggles, but just to realise that

simply repeating those struggles would probably also repeat the disappointments.

And saying this does not mean rejecting our current movements, from which I and others in this series write. We cannot seriously imagine a better world without *starting* from the movements we have – but in most cases we also cannot seriously imagine a better world without *going beyond* them: involving far more people perhaps, or making a much wider range of allies, or radicalising their goals far beyond the present, or transforming their action. Or perhaps all of the above.

We live in a time where some people have to naively celebrate movements because they are doing so in the spaces of for-profit media and publishing, of a social media driven by its own strange algorithms, or of an academia driven by status. None of these offer much space for movements to think, seriously, honestly and openly about where they are, their own limitations and weaknesses, and how they could overcome them.

But a better world asks us to be able to think, together, beyond this – as movement activists, as intellectuals if that

is the word for it, as ordinary human beings for whom this matters centrally and who want to be honest with ourselves and each other.

Neurodecolonization

One crucial thing that Zapatismo offers, theoretically and practically, is that it holds out the possibility of neurodecolonization (Michael Yellow Bird’s useful word) – thinking beyond the narrow horizons of neoliberal capitalism, of heteronormative patriarchy, of empire and settler societies⁴, but also thinking beyond (for example) a complacent Irish cultural nationalism which takes the end of empire as enough; and beyond a nostalgic rehearsal of the genealogies of past European movements.

Neurodecolonization though has to mean more than simply developing a new set of buzzwords to be deployed in building careers, cliques and credibility in media, social

⁴ Waziyawatin and Michael Yellow Bird. 2012. “Decolonizing our Minds and Actions”.
http://sarweb.org/media/files/sar_press_for_indigenous_minds_only_chapter_1.pdf

media or academic spaces, or even a more substantial set of ideas that find their inner logic in these institutions.

These institutions, and their intellectual practices, are not ours, and we cannot use them to emancipate ourselves if we just change the symbols we fit into their frameworks.

We need to step outside these spaces and ways of thinking, not simply rhetorically but in practice. Can we learn to think from and for *movement practice*, and try to find not just words but ways of working with words that articulate our collective action and help to develop it? Or can we come to a wide enough historical, international and cross-movement perspective that we do not simply recycle and recombine the local routines we happen to find ourselves in? Perhaps we can find the tools to become less prisoners of the mental and verbal habits of a dying culture?

A world where many worlds fit

Activists often repeat the gestures of Orientalism in relation to an “other” who can safely be located in another time and place, romanticised and then spoken for

in ways that suit us. More insidiously, they often conjure up people who are suffering – exploited, oppressed, stigmatised – but who have not been able to develop or sustain large-scale, radical movements. When we celebrate someone else (near or far – the victims of femicide or troubled youth, the globally displaced or the victims of racist violence) as objects of someone else’s action, it becomes easier to speak for them, because there is no collective actor through whom their voices speak. These “others” (spoken of as passive, at best in terms of “resistance” but never in terms of collusion) come to justify our own actions in terms we like – a foundational problem of most political parties and charities, most NGOs and aid work.

The value *for movements* (and intellectuals, and human beings) of the encounter with an *active*, collective, radical “other” in the present is that it forces us to think beyond ourselves. The more closely we listen to the Zapatistas, the less we can use them as a symbol for something we wanted to say or do anyway – and the more we have to expand our own thinking, to become part of that “world

where many worlds fit” by trying to allow many worlds to fit within our own minds.

It is surprising how hard this is. Across the world, radical intellectuals constantly invoke the need for “visions”, “goals” or “utopias” on a wide scale. But this urge to imagine How It Will Be For Everyone – what Marx called the cookbooks of the future – ignores what becomes very familiar, very quickly, in actual mass movements: we do things differently.

Real revolutions, and mass movements this side of revolution, are not homogenous. They always consist of many different groups working in different ways: with degrees of compatibility, communication and coordination, but *different*. There is no reason to imagine that a future which was genuinely free – free from oppressive state and economic power, free from poverty and violence, free from cultural hierarchies and stigmatisation – would lead to everyone doing the same thing or agreeing to do so. There is every reason to expect that a post-capitalist world would be a diverse one: the perspective of imagining homogeneity is that of an

“alternative elite”, a bird’s eye view in which what matters are The Rules.

What Zapatismo inspired around the world – but particularly in Latin America and India, in western Europe and north America – was a “movement of movements”, a coming-together of different popular struggles which did not seek to erase or hide that diversity of participants, tactics, goals but instead to find a way of working together, with slogans such as “One no, many yeses!” One common goal of breaking neoliberalism; many priorities and needs; many struggles.

Like other movement projects, this was the subject of ferocious argument at the time and since; but the question was a more honest one than most. Being different, having different starting points, how do we work together in response to a system which creates crisis for us in many different ways? We still do not know.

Paying theoretical attention

The Zapatistas also point towards something else: their existence and survival, 27 years after the uprising of 1994

but longer still since they emerged as a political strategy in the marginal lands of Chiapas. Other revolutionary attempts have come and gone in that period, but the fact of their survival – given the desperate rural poverty and the violent racist oppression these communities have always been subject to – is a hugely significant *theoretical* reality. The genuinely successful revolutions of the present are not the ones we would have expected.

Since 2012 the emergence of what is now the Self-Administration of North and East Syria, SANES (also known by its Kurdish name Rojava) has underlined the same point: in the teeth of a murderous regime, of Islamic State, of Turkish invasion and other great power interference, a marginal region of the Middle East has managed to generate and sustain its own revolution against state oppression and against patriarchal fundamentalism, for an ecological and self-governed reality, for nine years now – when the *only other* “success” of the revolutionary wave of 2010-11 is the struggling Tunisian state⁵.

⁵ This was written before Tunisia’s summer 2021 coup.

What these two revolutions have in common is, firstly, that they are uprisings beyond the ethno-national: they do not represent a single or simple “people” trying to take power in the nation-state or to create a separate one. The Zapatistas and SANES do not seek to rule their local states through military or electoral means: the Zapatistas include a multiplicity of indigenous groups who have always existed below and outside the Mexican nation-state project; while the left-nationalist goal of a socialist Kurdistan was formally abandoned by the Kurdish movement some decades back, and the SANES project now represents a variety of stateless groups (Kurds, Yezidis, Assyrians and others) along with Arabs.

Secondly, they do not seek the capitalist labour discipline, industrial productivity and top-down “development” characteristic of both capitalist and socialist states, North and South, in the twentieth century.

Thirdly, the undoubted combination of mass popular participation (not simply passive support) and radical orientation of the Zapatistas and SANES goes hand in hand with the self-activity of poor and stateless *women*. Many radical projects (of different flavours) have taken

patriarchy for granted and built their movements, and at times their states, on top of it – usually with some women’s groups or participation, some legal and material gains for women, but without centring the challenge to the everyday social relationships of patriarchy. At its worst, the result is the radicalism of “big men”, reproducing not just family patriarchy but local relationships of clientelism at village or neighbourhood level.

The (incomplete) revolution of everyday life which the outside world sees in the form of women’s participation in political power and military units, in the language that comes from these revolutions and the measures taken against male violence and domination, and in radically different forms of education for younger generations *also* expresses itself in a breaking of some of these chains of everyday patriarchal relationships. This is not – as many past activists would have seen it – a secondary matter which should not be emphasised too much lest it undermine the revolution. Instead, by transforming the bedrock relationships of the poorest communities it unleashes huge popular forces. By contrast, passive,

coerced or traditional allegiance to unchanged patriarchal and clientelistic power does not.

I am not trying here to theorise a strategy or ideal out of these two, very different examples. I simply want to note how – in a world where other and more familiar kinds of revolution are at best struggling and at worst obliterated – they seem to be far more successful than might be expected; and that their family resemblances may point us in the direction of an analysis of how power works today that revolutionaries and movement intellectuals should take seriously when we want to change the world.

Learning from each other's struggles

One other thought, about specific qualities of what we call indigeneity that may be important elsewhere: at present, as so often, the global media, including its radical component, are paying a high degree of attention to the self-presentation of privileged white people who claim to have the correct strategy for the necessary task of defeating a system that is taking us over the edge in terms of climate change. In this respect, the difference between

(say) Extinction Rebellion and Andreas Malm⁶ is minimal: neither strategy has in fact achieved anything other than fame of different kinds, an important motivation today.

By contrast, the groups which *have* managed effective resistance to the fossil fuel industry are very largely indigenous, from the Ogoni of the Niger Delta⁷ to the struggles against extractivism across the Americas⁸. Their effectiveness – despite small, impoverished and oppressed populations – comes from a combination of cohesiveness and radicalism, the willingness to take great risks, together. Why are indigenous groups particularly able to do this? What can those of us who are not indigenous learn?

I think the answer has to do with how hegemony works: specifically with how leading groups in the economy, state and society find allies for their projects not only

⁶ Northern prophets of nonviolence and violence respectively.

⁷ Corley, Íde, Helen Fallon, Laurence Cox. 2018. *Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa*. Daraja, Ottawa.
<http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/10161/>

⁸ <https://www.ienearth.org/indigenous-resistance-against-carbon/>

among other elites who have less at stake, but also among key sections of subaltern groups. They do not need to ally with the whole working class if they can find a social-democratic party, trade unions or a once-privileged group of full-time male white workers to support them around particular issues. They do not need to bring all women, or all LGBTQ+ people, on board, if they can offer participation in the neoliberal good life to wealthy white professionals in these categories and policy-making roles for NGOs and media projects. They do not need to speak to BIPOC people or ethnic minorities if they can offer careers for some that others can aspire to; and so on.

In other words, neoliberal elites can often offer some benefits to sections of subaltern groups – organisations, prominent individuals, and relatively privileged parts of the group – in return for allegiance or at least passive toleration of their own rule. But *other* subaltern groups' allegiance is not wanted: indigenous groups, like the homeless or illegal migrants, are not worth involving because of their lack of numbers, wealth and power. That very fact in turn means that efforts to engage, reward, convince and so on are less extensive.

At the same time, the fact of indigeneity also often means that – faced with ecologically destructive projects – such populations have nowhere else to go, or only at a huge cost. Relationships are powerful enough that they can be remade in the shanty-towns of the cities⁹: but nevertheless many will lose their language, see community ties broken, lose a relationship to the land that underpins their everyday economy and culture. This, together with the relative lack of a leadership, organisations or better-off members willing to collude with neoliberalism, opens up a far greater potential for resistance.

A non-indigenous analogy to this is the contrast between the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq – concerned with maximising its income from oil production for the benefit of the key groups involved, and a de facto ally of the Turkish military – and SANES. Unlike the KRG, SANES does not control the oil in its own territory (a point of central interest for the regime and other powers) and faces the prospect of genocidal violence from the regime, from Isis and from Turkey and its associated

⁹ Zibechi, Raúl. 2007. *Dispersar El Poder*. Abya-Yala, Quito.

jihadi militias. Nobody is effectively attempting to create a SANES elite whose loyalty could be bought; and ordinary people know what awaits them if the house of cards collapses. Hence they have every reason to fight, despite the odds.

These are important, and sobering, concerns for those of us elsewhere, whether in the schoolchildren's strikes for climate, workers' organisations seeking a "green new deal" or large-scale direct action against ecologically destructive projects. Even when these are grounded in "the wretched of the earth" and not in populations that stand to gain from the short-term continuation of the system, those excluded in these contexts are more fragmented; they have fewer opportunities to build cohesion; and the scope for partial collusion is greater. To build a genuinely effective and radical climate justice movement in these contexts requires more than good words: it requires a massive effort to work together.

Looking up to see the hills

For all of these reasons, the existence of the Zapatistas is a call to look up beyond the polluted walls or gleaming skyscrapers of our local contexts, movements and histories and to think about where we are and where we might be able to go, in a wider perspective. In its unarguable difference, effectiveness, and capacity to speak for itself, Zapatismo calls radical activists and intellectuals alike to look up and see the hills, pay attention to the forests, and look at the stars.

3. Standing in our own struggles, together: how Zapatismo has inspired us

For our other movements, the Zapatistas have been a lighthouse that warned us to keep away from the rocks of simple cheerleading and shone a questioning light back on the many worlds we inhabit, asking us to consider what our own struggles needed – and to do it.

Instead of offering us a new Book which held the magic secrets of perfect revolution, *caminar preguntando* asked us all to listen to and learn from one another's many and diverse struggles. The future is one we make and discover together, as we try to break what is breaking us in our own worlds, trusting in one another's answers – not as sufficient for our own situations but as another dimension of a shared and complex struggle.

In the alterglobalisation “movement of movements”, the Zapatistas inspired us to do this. In Ireland, as in many other countries, we brought together different struggles

from below and on the left, outside NGOs and the statist / authoritarian left to challenge international financial institutions and local powerholders, neoliberal policies and ecological destruction – and to try to make another world possible.

In much of the global North, we succeeded perhaps in pulling the rug of legitimacy out from under neoliberalism, but no more than that. We now face new problems, as neoliberalism finds one crisis after another (“war on terror”, recession and austerity, now Covid and soon perhaps the climate), offers its own patented solutions as though it was not part of the problem, and ties us all up in discussing the details.

Still this reflects neoliberalism’s own long-term crisis of consent, as it can no longer offer enough to enough people, a wide enough social coalition to be able to think strategically into the future. Such crises happen regularly in the history of capitalism: the crises of 1968–73, of 1943–48, of 1915–24 were all moments where the existing coalition of forces could not hold and new possibilities had to come through from below (independence from empire, democracy in place of

fascism, welfare states, the vision of autonomy) or from above (neoliberalism, Cold War, fascism). We do not yet know which way things will go now – and this is why neoliberalism keeps kicking the can down the road, offering one distraction after another to keep us focussed on a short term which is in any case its preferred terrain.

Talking to each other

That distraction is helped by our movements' own weakness in creating or sustaining spaces where we can talk together. If we can only speak to one another through the institutions of state or for-profit media, social media or academia, we can only speak in certain ways. Those ways prioritise among other things headline-chasing, responding to The Latest New Thing rather than creating a dialogue among ourselves, arguing about what is the right opinion to hold, or what policy should we seek from the state or corporations, but not discussing, together, *what we should do*.

What we might need or want to do in our movements is ... very broad. We might need as a matter of extreme

urgency to resist the rise of the far right in its many different forms around the world, and the violence both of authoritarian states and of those who capitalism has driven mad. If we do not do this, we have no movements that can act, and our opinions are just noise.

Also as a matter of urgency, we might need to act so as to prevent even greater climate disaster, which means gathering the collective strength to take down a system constructed around the search for endless growth on a finite planet – and, before that, to break the power of the industries that are intensifying the generation of greenhouse gases: the fossil fuel industry, the transport industry, agribusiness, the military. Can we imagine what it would take to do even this much, in sober daylight?

But many or most of us have to start from the struggle to defend ourselves and each other: women resisting patriarchy and femicide; working-class communities defending jobs and welfare and creating mutual aid; BIPOC, migrant and ethnic minority people resisting racism, xenophobia and murderous police; LGBTQ+ communities resisting homophobia and transphobia; disabled people, the neurodiverse, people with mental

health issues, people with special needs fighting a million forms of exclusion and stigmatisation; communities targetted by religious fundamentalism or casteism; artists, scholars, journalists and others trying to think and create in the teeth of repression; and on and on and on.

Very few of us are none of these things, and many of us have several battles to fight at once just to defend who and where we are, the people we love and the shape of our everyday lives. We cannot resist the right, save the planet or create a new world as something *other* than these struggles. Remaking the world has to start from our own needs here and now – but, unlike what neoliberalism offers us, it means breaking the structures, forces and collective actors (corporations, states, fundamentalisms, far-right movements) that are breaking us and moving towards creation without losing those connections to each other.

Working together and talking together are part of the same challenge. We do not yet have a “movement of movements” that can remake the world: one thing we can do is start new movement dialogues that go beyond the neoliberal niche markets of our different movements

and communities in struggle, countries and political traditions – and that happen in our own spaces and for our own purposes.

It is telling that unlike so many “better-known” movements (visible on social media, visible in the press and broadcast media, visible in academia), the Zapatistas are not always easy to see. They are not constantly taking positions on the “issues of the day” as seen from a newsroom in a capital city, they are not keeping up with the latest language required to maintain one’s status on social media, they are not engaging with the Big Names that matter in academia today. And yet they most definitely think theoretically and politically; they work far more creatively with language than most celebrities; and they are always, always speaking about things that matter. Their revolution is mostly not televised; it is mostly not “liked” or “shared”; and it is not being cited either. “And yet, it moves” – and it moves mountains.

Thinking as “we”

We were asked for these pamphlets to reflect on how Zapatismo has inspired us personally in creating initiatives for other ways of life in our own contexts. But I am not sure about that singular you, “te” in the Spanish invitation for this pamphlet series. WB Yeats – whose brilliant poetry stood in contrast to his proto-fascist politics and terrible personal life – wrote that “the intellect of man” (of course) had to choose “perfection of the life, or of the work” – but is it “I” or “we” who chooses? Choice doesn’t arise for most of us as this sort of isolated individual pondering, but at the intersection of relations between people, where connections come together and sparks rise from the interactions of the problems people are facing in different places and of the ways they are trying to solve them.

And real movement work, by definition, can’t be done individually. At best it has an individual’s name attached to it for convenience or as a form of symbolism (at worst, as a form of branding). Our projects, networks and groups are always cooperative – or they are not worth their salt. They are working relationships where what we can think

and do together is far more than the sum of what we can do individually.

Writing is perhaps more isolated, but for movements the best of that too is a sharing from movement experiences and other people's reflections. And what makes it come to life is putting it out for the world – free if at all possible, or sometimes as a book (often available free online with a little searching), that might be read by someone who finds some of it useful where they are, for their own struggles.

The real challenge is how to think as the “we” of movements or communities in struggle, how to develop our own “means of intellectual production” that are genuinely collaborative and grounded in action – not the false “we” of media headlines, social media posts, academic noise. How can we create a “we” in practice so that it means those of us who are working and talking together to break neoliberal capitalism and allow our many yeses to flourish? If we are not yet in a revolution, how can we act towards one, not towards existing institutions?

4. Blowing on the embers: what the Gira Zapatista means

The Gira Zapatista to what they are renaming *Slumil K'ajxemk'op*, the insurgent land or the land that does not give up, blows on the embers in Europe (our old rebellious continent) of the movement of movements that was inspired by Zapatismo, of the radical hearts of the uprisings of 2011, 1989, 1968, 1944, 1919, 1871, 1848 or the Atlantic Revolutions that linked France and America, Ireland and Haiti – and of all the different movements and communities in struggle that are coming to listen to and talk to the Zapatista delegations (as well as play with the kids or host their women's soccer teams).

In our various networks supporting the Gira, we are trying to add kindling, to rake the embers a bit closer together, to blow on the fire and help it grow. It is not just an event, and not just a tour: it is a way of remembering who we are.

Our movements have all too often become trapped in a space of impossibility: again and again it feels as if we have

mobilised an irresistible force but met an immovable object. In that impossibility, our movements' daily practice has become institutionalised, national or local, geared to service provision, focussed on selling images, celebrating words, building friendship cliques.

The dialogues we are organising in the Gira should, can, perhaps help our movements take their own wider goals and original purposes seriously again.

Their immovable object, neoliberal power, has a serious, and long-term, crisis of consent that *our* movements helped bring about. Hence the crises, hence the turn to repression and the far right, hence the “socialisms of fools” cavorting across the continent in the middle of the plague.

The Gira, for us, is about making other worlds possible, together, in practice: blowing on the embers, standing in our own struggles, and looking beyond the capitalist horizon.

It is a good time to do this.

5. Showing our compañeras around: bringing it all back home

Like Mexico, like most of the world, when Ireland got “freedom” (national independence, parliamentary democracy, women’s suffrage, some kind of welfare state, education) it turned out to be not what we meant. “The people” – or rather those who stayed in our postcolonial bit of an island rather than emigrating in search of something better, and those who ruled the roost through property, religion, networks and so on – supported our own “institutional revolutionary parties” that have governed the state in an unbroken line from 1919 until today.

This country was caught in the trap of a way of thinking focussed on small property – the farm, the shop, the house for rent, the business. Family, gender, sexuality, religion all followed from that: the minority who would inherit in any given family controlling those who would not (and who could therefore not be allowed to have families or relationships). Outside or below these were

rural labourers, the Traveller ethnic minority, the urban working class, and religious Others. Racism and exclusion grew and grow in this soil.

And yet – despite everything – the island moved.

Our 1968, like yours, was drowned in blood; not in the independent capital Dublin but in the bitter colonial violence north of the border that responded to the civil rights movement: decades of “Troubles” whose legacy still shapes so much of politics, not a hundred kilometres away.

South of that border, just as we are one of the few places where the peasants won the land outright, we are also one of the few places that defeated nuclear power. Our movements have a long history of working together in the struggle against Church power: feminists, LGBTQ+ activists, leftists of all kinds and liberals fought step by step to free bodies, hearts, minds. Working-class community activists built their own power on the ground in many areas, drawing on what they had learned from returned development workers who had become Freireans in Latin America or the Philippines.

Our movements have never had *political* majorities, but we keep on constructing *social* ones, and winning on the streets what we cannot win in elections. (Why we keep imagining things might be different is another question.)

We fought Shell for 15 years this century – they won a Pyrrhic victory, but we won immediately after that on fracking, and new fossil fuel infrastructure now faces an uphill battle. After the crash, the state tried to commodify water and met massive resistance led by working-class areas. They had to recognise that they could not assert police control over much of the state, and they could not imprison enough people to force it through.

After a 35-year-long battle, our movements finally overturned the constitutional ban on abortion in 2018, and the myth of a Catholic Ireland was thoroughly skewered. Yet the settling of accounts with that older history of abuse and institutions has a long way to go.

So a rebellious people keep facing down a suit-wearing establishment – and winning as often as not. Yet some of them have spent decades trying to court our movements: giving leaders the chance to run for parliament, offering

concessions and clientelism, trading funding to NGOs for acceptance of state policy priorities, helping wealthy professionals get the respectability they often crave despite their gender, race or sexuality.

All this makes it harder to bring movements together. Neoliberalism lowers everyone's expectations, it offers gains for us if we abandon other movements, and creates niche media markets where we only hear about our own issue or organisation. And it turns out that many people want to believe there is Someone Up There who stands for the right things – the president, the opposition, a local deputy or councillor, even a celebrity.

Elites in trouble create new crises: playing with fire and opening space for the racist far right in a dozen different ways, consciously trying to import the worst of Trump's America and Brexit Britain while intensifying police violence against migrants and minorities.

Meanwhile this city we are walking through with you has become one where ordinary people cannot afford to live. People are leaving again because the sheer cost of renting

has become too much; hotels are replacing homes, even in a pandemic when nobody is using them.

And beyond the city, the world is on fire; the plague continues; the floodwaters rise. If this goes on much longer, the Gulf Stream that keeps this island mild and wet will end – and we will find out just what it means to be at the same latitude as Sakhalin, Alaska and Newfoundland.

We do not yet know what we will do; but all we can do is start from where we are and try to think beyond it together – and then act. The Gira Zapatista is a great gift to us in this. We are glad to have you walking with us, asking questions of each other, learning from each other's struggles.

Thankyou for coming here.

About the author

Laurence Cox is a writer, activist and educator committed to the struggle for a better world. He was involved in the anti-capitalist “Grassroots Gatherings” networking Irish movements in the 2000s, co-founded the open-access activist/academic movement journal “Interface” (<https://interfacejournal.net>), now on its 25th issue, and works with the pan-European [Ulex movement training collective](#).

One of Europe’s leading social movement researchers, his books include *Why Social Movements Matter*; *We Make Our Own History*; *Voices of 1968*; and *The Irish Buddhist: the Forgotten Monk who Faced Down the British Empire*. Most of his writing is free online via <https://laurencecox.wordpress.com>.

Cover art

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<https://www.howmuchisenough.online/>

A Zapatista delegation is visiting the island of Ireland to meet social movements and communities in struggle “from below and to the left” in October 2021 as part of the wider Gira Zapatista, currently reconquering Europe and then going on to other continents.

Please support the tour [here](#).

Details of open events in Ireland will be posted on [facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

