

Chiapas, 15 years later

Wednesday 4 February 2009, by [ANTENTAS Josep Maria](#), [VIVAS Esther](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2009).

January 1st of this year marked 15 years since the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, which coincided with the Free Trade Agreement, among the United States, Canada and Mexico, coming into effect. The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN)'s eruption dismantled with one stroke the pretensions of Carlos Salinas of Gortari's corrupt, neoliberal government, which had presented the Free Trade Agreement's approbation as "modernity" definitively entering into Mexico. The opposition was galvanized by a treaty which, already during its negotiation process had incited considerable campaigns against it as well as an innovative and interesting dynamic of cross-border coordination among governments, unions and organizations from the three countries concerned.

The uprising symbolically marked the beginning of a new international cycle of protest to the "new world order" proclaimed by Bush Senior in 1991. This moment arose out of the reorganization of world powers, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, during the first Gulf War in 1991, and right on the eve of the USSR's disintegration, to come at the end of that year.

The Zapatistas were the first to codify a general criticism of the new world order, situating their specific fight within a framework of defense of "humanity against neoliberalism". In the words of the subcommander: "Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, asian in Europe, chicano in San Isidro, anarquist in Spain, Palestinian in Israel, indigenous in the streets of San Cristóbal, "chavo banda" in Neza, rocker in the CU, jew in Nazi Germany, ombudsman in the Secretary of National Defense, feminist in a political party, communist in the Cold War...". The Zapatista revolt combined a peculiar form of the new and the old, the defense of indigenous rights together with new technologies and swift communication policies. Its language and its strategic approach were innovative, even with its limitations and its contradictions, during a moment of crisis and uncertainty among the left.

The Zapatistas were also pioneers in their attempts to articulate the incipient international resistance against the new world order, calling the 1st Intercontinental Meeting for Humanity and against Neoliberalism, in the Lacandona Jungle in 1996. They gave a decisive impulse to the emergence of what would later come to be called "internationalism of resistances" and which would take its greatest expression in the abrupt beginnings of the "antiglobalization" movement during the Seattle protests at the summit of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in November of 1999.

Already in this new century, the specific visibility of the Zapatistas has lost its power precisely because of the rising "antiglobalization" movement, with its track of international mobilizations during the official summits which took its greatest splendor in the period of 1999-2003; because of the rise of the World Social Forum proceedings starting in 2001; the anti-war movement of 2003; and the rise of resistance to neoliberalism in the whole Latin America initiated symbolically with the "water war" in Cochabamba (Bolivia) in April of 2000, together with several experiences of progressive governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and now Paraguay. Despite all of this, the Zapatistas have still had important moments of visibility and political prominence, during their principal initiatives, such as the "Caravana a la Ciudad de México", in February and March of 2001, which culminated with the multitudinous arrival of Marcos to the Zócalo, and the "Otra Campaña" in 2005 and 2006. Zapatistas have remained a reference point of all the resistance movements against global capitalism.

The current world is rather different than it was fifteen years ago. The “new world order” announced by Bush Sr. has staggered. If the United States then presented itself as the sole, undeniable superpower, today it appears as a power in decline, which struggles to maintain its world hegemony. If neoliberalism, codified by the so-called “Washington Consensus”, was put forward as the sole political possibility and was at its historical apogee, now has been brought into discredit and question. And if capitalism emerged victorious after the Cold War, and ever appeared to be an unrivaled economic system, promising prosperity for the whole world, then today more than ever we witness its destructive nature. Not only is it incapable of satisfying most of humanity’s basic needs, but now it threatens the very species’ survival through the global ecological crisis it has provoked.

Since the Zapatista uprising, neoliberal politics have become deeper, more rapid, and more generalized. Yet by their own internal contradictions, they have engendered a number of growing, various resistances, although they remain without the force necessary to overthrow neoliberalism, and provoke a paradigm shift.

“Ya Basta” (“Enough”) was the shout which showed the wrath and indignation of the Zapatista insurrection. “Ya Basta” is what millions of people have felt, thought and expressed during these fifteen years of rebellion against the current order of things. And so, they have buried the thesis of “the end of history” proclaimed shortly before the Zapatista uprising by Francis Fukuyama, and embraced by then confident neoliberal ideologues. Deeply to the contrary, history has not ended, and the result of the match has yet to be determined.

P.S.

* This article was published in originally in the Spanish newspaper Publico the 31/12/2008.

* Josep María Antentas is a member of the editorial board of the magazine Viento Sur, and a professor of sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Esther Vivas is a member of the Centre for Studies on Social Movements (CEMS) at Universitat Pompeu Fabra. She is author of the book in Spanish “Stand up against external debt” and co-coordinator of the books also in Spanish “Supermarkets, No Thanks” and “Where is Fair Trade headed?”. She is also a member of the editorial board of Viento Sur (www.vientosur.info).