

BACK TO THE SENSES

At midnight on 1st January 1994, NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, the US and Canada came into force. Barely two hours later, thousands of Indians armed with machetes, clubs and a few guns occupied four of the main towns in Chiapas, a province on Mexico's southern border with Guatemala, and declared war on the Mexican government. The rebels revealed that they were Indians of different ethnic groups calling themselves Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). Rebelling not only against the President and the army, they appealed for an end to 500 years of oppression and 40 years of "development". They expressed the hope that a new political regime will allow their people to reclaim their commons and to regenerate their own forms of governance and their art of living and of dying. It was time to say "Basta! Enough!"

During the first week of 1994 I was in continual celebration, but also in personal turmoil and puzzlement. I was asking myself why I was so enthused with the Zapatistas. Was I not, for 30 years, so firmly against any form of violence?¹

I was one of the thousands, perhaps millions, who were immediately in the streets to express a kind of support to the Zapatistas ("You are not alone", we were saying), but also to stop the violence. As the mobilizations intensified, under very strong national and international pressure and before the gigantic march in Mexico City announced for January 12 –perhaps a million will be marching towards the main plaza- President Salinas was forced to declare a unilateral ceasefire. It was immediately accepted by the Zapatistas. Since that very day they became the champions of non violence in Mexico. They have used words as their main weapon.

In confusion, during those days, I looked for advice and wisdom in Gandhi. My reading reminded me that Gandhi affirmed that "non violence is the weapon not of the weak but of the strong". You can not preach non violence to mice about to be mangled by a cat. Gandhi was convinced that the Indians were the strong: there was no reason for 300 million of them to be afraid of a 150 thousand British. Non violence is for the strong.

For years, the people now known as the Zapatistas tried everything. They were dying like flies – of hunger, curable diseases or the killings by the local structure of power. They attempted everything, economic and political organization, marches, sit-ins, even that impressive march of two thousand miles. Nobody heard. Neither the government nor the society. They were the weak. They were left with nothing but their dignity and used violence as the last resource. They had no hope of a military victory and assumed that they will be exterminated, but also assumed that their sacrifice will awaken the society and their children and grandchildren will be able to live a different life.

"The art of dying for *satyagrahi* – said Gandhi once- consists in facing death cheerfully in the performance of one's duty". He also said that a *satyagrahi* is someone ready to give the precious gift of his life, for his ideals, in a non violent way. That was exactly

¹ In the 60s I did not embrace non-violence. I fell into it! At that time, in the years of Che Guevara and the glory of the Cuban revolution, I was involved in a would-be guerrilla. In Latin America, we were compelled, by a strong moral obligation, to start the revolution. My own attempt ended in a terrible episode of a senseless murder...compelled me to quit, horrified by the violence we were imposing to ourselves and wanted to impose to the whole society.

what the Zapatistas were doing. With the insurrection of the civil society, however, willing to support them, they became the strong. And they thus became the champions of non violence. They later underlined this element of their struggle with the following, surprising statement:

What the government has not understood is that we are already dead. It is not only that they can kill us physically or politically. It is because yes, we were people ready to die, for our own people, for our ideals, but we were also people ready to kill, and no people ready to kill should be in public office. We were politically dead from the very beginning. And it is very good that we know this, for our work, for our activity, for our struggle attempting to eliminate the need of any army, any rebellion, any form of violence.

The Zapatistas are thus doing the opposite of all other armed revolutionaries, who assume that their rebellion, their willingness to die, gives them the right to be rulers. It is also the opposite to the behavior of all rulers, in democracies or dictatorships, who assume they have the legitimate right to kill or to order to kill.

A *satyagrahi* would clearly adopt the Zapatista principle: “Everything for everyone, nothing for us”. Time and again the government told the Zapatistas that it was ready to give to them whatever they asked for. Time and again the Zapatistas answered: We want nothing for us.

Years later, in 1998, I was involved in a peculiar meeting in San Cristóbal de Las Casas: “Gandhi in Chiapas”. With a beautiful exhibition and a series of conversations we wanted to bring the attention to the spirit of non violence, for us embedded in Zapatismo. From the very beginning, in my intervention, I expressed the difficulties of the endeavor. First of all, how to deal with Gandhi himself? You have his prodigious deeds and his written words, 10 million of them, 90 volumes, expressing not a theory or a doctrine or a narrative but the continual change of his experiments... Who was him?

And then, his double, his multiple discourse. He said that a Hindu can only be judged by Hindus with Hindu criteria, as a Muslim should be judged by Muslims with Muslim criteria. In the same way, he adapts his language and concepts to his audience. If he addresses the British, he speaks with the concepts and ideas the British can understand. He tells them, for example, that he wants national independence, because that is something that makes sense to the British. To his people, in contrast, he explains why they should oppose nationalizing British domination. The worst for India would be to become a national state, he warned. We want *Hind Swaraj*, not independence, he proclaimed. A few weeks before dying, Gandhi told Nehru: “The day India becomes a nation state she will cease to be in the center of my heart”.

Another difficulty: everything that Gandhi writes or says is buried in its context. He is not writing in the abstract, for abstract audiences, even when he is speaking to hundreds of millions. Whenever he writes he roots his words in the immediate context. If you don't know how and why he wrote a specific article or a letter, in what context, for what purpose, to whom, you will not be able to fully understand what he is saying.

Anyway, I said then, in 1998, and I repeat today, that I cannot find my Gandhi in the many intellectual or political discourses written or spoken about Gandhi, where Gandhi

is used for whatever purposes. I find him in ordinary men and women, around the world, people that perhaps ignore his name or his deeds or at the most know a few of his articles or saw the film. People are adopting Gandhian ways, under the influence and reverberation of other people behavior, through contagion and co-motion, in a very Gandhian way.

The interpretation of Gandhi poses a lot of difficulties. You can see it immediately in the above paragraphs. I am talking of a Gandhian way...after declaring that it is impossible to define what the Gandhian way of thinking or doing is! The same happens with the Zapatistas. The same predicament: words and deeds, quantity and quality. The stories of and about the Zapatistas are innumerable. Zapatista communiqués are published timely and regularly in a dozen languages. They immediately appear on many internet web pages. (There are thousand of web pages about the Zapatistas [5620 in the last count I know, in 2002] and hundreds of thousands of references, perhaps millions. Google cannot stop when you click Zapatistas). The books containing communiqués and other materials generated by the Zapatistas are published in multiple languages and fill several metres of a library shelf. The books, essays, and articles published *about* the Zapatistas may fill a whole middle size library. News about the Zapatistas appear regularly in the media, which continually attempt to forget them but are forced to bring them back to the front page every time they take an important initiative. The quantity is not the main problem. The Zapatistas are not presenting an ideology, a political proposal or doctrine, a specific narrative. They are saying what they need to say, in certain contexts and circumstances. And they change continually. They listen carefully, learn with others and modify accordingly their path, without renouncing their principles...principles that you need to infer from their behaviour! Who can dare to say “this is the Zapatista way, the Zapatista thinking”, “Zapatismo is this or that”?

In spite of the immense difficulties, I dared that night, seven years ago, as I am daring today, to connect Gandhi and the Zapatistas. Yes, I know. How to relate Gandhi with an army? Is this not an obscene delirium, an oxymoron? Let’s examine the question in several planes.

First, we may point out how Gandhi supported armed violence in different moments of his life –like the Boer War or the First World War, in his call for India’s Army, etc. From the very beginning he said: “I have come to see...that there is non violence in violence” (July 25, 1918) or: “I feel certain that the power must be restored to India. The result may be carnage. Then India must go through it.” (July 29, 1918). In the last days of his life he was explicitly supporting the use of the Army in Punjab... We will easily fall, in this vein, in the conventional calls for consistency and the confusion created by Gandhi’s “contradictions”. I do think that this argument is basically wrong and betrays Gandhi’s life and ideas. He never advocated violence.

A second plane is that in which we oppose violence to cowardice. After the attempt in 1908, his son approaches Gandhi: “What should I do in a similar case? Should I use the violence of my body to stop the guy trying to kill you? Should I passively resist or escape?” Gandhi immediately reminds his son that “non violence is the supreme virtue, cowardice is the worst vice”. He must not be a coward. And he offers him the reasoning I mentioned at the beginning, the reasoning rescuing me in January, 1994 from my moral perplexity.

This is a strong connection. When the Zapatistas were the weak, they had no other way but the use of violence. Once they became the strong, thanks to the support of the civil society, they were able to become the champions of non violence. But this is still superficial. We need to go to a deeper plane. Non violence seems to be, in Gandhi, not only a means towards an end, a way to reach political goals. Non violence is for Gandhi an organizing principle in the society, a way of life. He opposed the design of the nation state, for example, because violence is embedded in it: it gives to the State the monopoly of “legitimate” violence. Non violence is for him a political form to organize social life in such a way that *no* violence is propitiated or allowed. Neither Gandhi nor the Zapatistas know in detail the institutions or structure of such a society, but they know that it will be a radically new society. Gandhi argued that non violence is as old the hills...but also that violence and war had been part and parcel of the human condition since the beginning of times. The time has come, he thinks, to put an end to it. The Zapatistas say that their struggle looks for a society in which no army, police or uprising is needed. Their *¡Basta!* mainly applies to violence, all forms of violence.

To preach against violence within a modern, democratic State, as the powers that be had been doing to the Zapatistas, is hypocritical. They fully accept or use daily violence, economic, social, institutional violence. The preaching attempts to disable the rebellion, people’s rebellion, to tie their hands, not to stop violence.

The opposite attitude is perhaps properly expressed in acts of forgiving. I am not alluding to the Christian pardon, offering the other cheek, which was a clear inspiration for Gandhi but did not define *satyagraha*. It is not something to be applied to Gandhi’s example of the mice –the mice forgiving the cat at the point of devouring it, as Gandhi himself did, in his reflections about the Jews in Nazi Germany: they cannot change the situation with their behavior. I allude here to the forgiving act performed as an expression of a superior moral and political conviction, as an incarnated ideal, by someone who *can* do otherwise.

Among the Chinantecos, one of the indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, “man who kills woman is burned alive”. They say that this terrible norm has been very effective to reduce violence against women. In fact, when you enter into the Chinantla you may perceive in the air something subtly different in the attitudes about women. Bartola Morales is a very corpulent Chinanteca, a very courageous one. She and her sister had been prominent leaders and activists in the Chinantla. In 1994 a local *cacique* hired a few killers to kill Bartola’s sister. They did not only kill her; they chopped her body, they mutilated her after the killing. They also hurt their mother, who was there, but abandoned the body, taking her for dead. But the mother survived. Although badly hurt, she was able to crawl to the village, where the killers were walking around, convinced that no one could know what they just did. The people captured them immediately and began to prepare the fires to burn them alive. According to the tradition, this should be done in the presence of the family of the dead person. They thus called Bartola, who came immediately. She saw the broken, bloody pieces of the body of her sister. She saw her mother badly injured, almost dying. And then she confronted her people: “I don’t want the killers to be burned alive”. The people, her own people, put an enormous pressure on her. They told her that she was breaking a very old tradition. But Bartola had taken a decision and was firmly affirmed in it. She knew well what violence brings. As Gandhi said, the application of the principle “an eye for an eye” will leave everybody blind. And Bartola was able to bring her people to reflection, to explore how

they could stop violence against women, or the violence of the *cacique* and the killers, without more violence...

One day, in 1985, after the earthquake devastating Mexico City, I was returning calmly, with some friends and colleagues, from a visit to one of the post-earthquake construction sites neighboring Tepito, one of the poorest popular *barrios* in the city. We were surprised by a general state of excitement in the neighborhood. That same morning, a four-year-old girl had been raped by one of the neighbors in the *vecindad*. The doctor found no physical injury, which implied that the rape had not been carried out to its completion. But the attempt has been made; the culprit has been discovered in the act. The entire neighborhood was discussing what to do.

One of our companions reacted immediately, and violently, expressing perfectly her middle-class rage:

- “To jail with him”, she demanded peremptorily.

The neighbors gazed at her very calmly:

- “What for”, they said, “so they can turn him into a criminal?”
- “At least to the psychiatrist”, she demanded.
- “What for”, they insisted, “so that they can make him crazy?”

They continued discussing for a long time. Some suggested that it was necessary to kick him out of the community. Others argued that this man had fought alongside them all for the past twenty years, and had worked hard as the most dedicated for the new homes. Someone suggested that he at least be sent to a different *vecindad*. That would be unfair, ran the counterargument:

- “Here at least we know him, we know how he is, we can take care of him and of ourselves. Who know what he would do in another *vecindad*?”

They continued discussing. The final consensus leaned towards letting him stay, but only if the child’s mother accepted. Once consulted, the mother agreed. The man still lives there; I am told he is a model of cooperation and solidarity. He no longer lives alone, as he used to, since he found a young woman to live with him despite his fifty years of age. He seems quite content. The girl is flourishing as a beautiful young woman. She got an incredible amount and quality of affection in the *vecindad*.

The second day of the uprising, the Zapatistas captured one of the most hated men of Chiapas: Absalón Castellanos, former Governor and General of the Army. They announced that he will have a fair trial by a Revolutionary Court. Many expected that he would be shot: all guerrillas use such trials for political purposes, as exemplary punishments. A few weeks later, the Court published a communiqué. Castellanos was found guilty of many crimes. The Court sentenced him to work in a community for the rest of his life. But it recommended to the Collective Command of the EZLN to forgive him. He should live in shame for the rest of his life, forgiven by the brothers, sons and wives of the Indians he humiliated, illegally jailed or killed. A few weeks later, Castellanos was handed back to the representative of the President. A doctor certified that he was in good health and Castellanos himself declared that the EZLN treated him

very well. He is back at home, with his family.

I do think that in these stories we can observe a kind of style, a kind of forgiveness that is heteronomous to the Christian forgiveness. The epitome of such style can be the story of Castellanos. With these examples, I think, we are perhaps touching one of the most puzzling and challenging elements of Gandhi's teachings. For Gandhi, the violence of those governing us, the violence of the military or the colonialists, was not born with them. They became violent. Our rulers are violent because their environment allows them to be violent and even force them to be violent. But we are their environment, the environment of those rulers committing every kind of aggression against us. We let them to behave that way. And some times we reproduce and continue their violence. If we want to stop such violence we need to do something else, like Bartola, the people of the *vecindad*, or the Zapatistas... We need to create a new environment. And this implies to fully assume our responsibilities, our duties, our obligations. When H.G. Wells asked Gandhi to write something for a document entitled "Rights of Man", he responded: "I suggest the right way. Begin with a charter of Duties of Man and I promise the rights will follow as spring follows winter." The Zapatistas have been struggling for the recognition of Indigenous rights, i.e. recognizing that they exist (as peoples) and thus they can live their lives in their own way, which is not based on rights but responsibility. *Community* meant, in Latin, a group of people linked by obligations. The indigenous people, like the Zapatistas, live according to that principle.

Hind Swaraj was Gandhi's main proposal for India. As always in Gandhi, everything is open to discussion. In the chapter "What is *Swaraj*?" in *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* he carefully and brilliantly explains in simple terms what *swaraj* is not, not what *swaraj* is. The book ends with his vow to dedicate his life...to understand it! Innumerable allusions to *swaraj* invite to confusion and perplexity. "*Swaraj* depends upon our ability to control all the forces of violence on our side. There is no *swaraj* if there is violence on the part of the people." (9-2-1921, p.152). "*Swaraj* has no meaning for the millions if they do not know how to employ their enforced idleness. The attainment of *Swaraj* is possible...only with the revival of the spinning wheel" (13-10-1921, p.215). "*Swaraj* will not be far off when we come to realize that a single Indian's honor is the country's honor." (23-11-1924, p.222). "*Swaraj* is an all-satisfying goal for all time... It is infinitely greater than and includes independence. It is a vital word. It has been sanctified by the noble sacrifices of thousands of Indians... It is a sacrilege to displace that word by a foreign importation of doubtful value...My method is conversion, not coercion; it is self-suffering, not the suffering of the tyrant...I know that a whole people can adopt it without accepting it as a creed and without understanding its philosophy...Through the deliverance of India, I seek to deliver the so called weaker races of the Earth from the crushing wheels of Western exploitation in which England is the greatest partner...I want India to come to her own and that state cannot be better defined by any single word that *swaraj*. Its content will vary with the action that the nation is able to put forth at a given moment. India's coming to her own will mean every nation doing likewise". (12-1-1928, p.228). "Before I ever knew anything of politics in my early youth, I dreamt the dream of communal unity of the heart... Who would not risk sacrificing his life for the realization of such a dream? Then we shall have real *Swaraj*". (18-1-1948, p.240).²

² These quotes and others from Eric H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth* (New York: Norton, 1969) and *Gandhi – Essential Writings*, edited by V.V. Ramana Murti (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1970)

As usual, with Gandhi, I can continue for hours and hundreds of quotes, without a *final* “definition” or “clarification”. Something similar happens with the Zapatistas and autonomy, a word that in my view symbolizes in our context what *swaraj* symbolizes in India. We can have every kind of quotes and discussions and we will not get a *final* “definition”. When one of their advisors asked the Zapatistas about their definition of autonomy, in our first meeting with them in La Realidad for the dialogue with the government, they answered: “Our autonomy, the autonomy we practice every day in our communities, is not the only one and it is not necessarily the best. We want to listen to other indigenous peoples”. And one of these peoples, a Yaqui, said once: “Autonomy is not something that we can ask for or something that some one can give to us. It is something that we have, in spite of every kind of domination we have suffered”.

The most important connection I can imagine between Gandhi and the Zapatistas is an attitude implying several things. First, he is not planning or designing a future, but introducing in the present what he perceives as incarnated social ideals. His struggle opposes exploitation, in both capitalism and socialism; in any social organization in which one class of people may exploit, discriminate or marginalize another in the name of public or private property or other mechanisms or principles. He formulates a radical critique of the industrial mode of production. And finally he feels the need to incarnate and practice whatever he is suggesting. When Gandhi was asked about his message, he responded: “My life is my message”. And we all know and recognize his famous *dictum*: “Be the change you wish for the world”. This attitude, embracing the three elements, is a very precise description of the Zapatistas, in both words and deeds.

All these elements are important and meaningful. At the very end, however, my Gandhi is no longer the shrewd politician or the *satyagrahi*. What is for me of increasing importance and put Gandhi in a different category, like no other Great Man of the XX century, is his personal concern, almost obsession, with the means and ways to live, just to live, under the conditions that can be accessible to everyone. His whole life, and perhaps most of his writing, is clearly associated with his experiments – not with Truth in the abstract, with God, but with specific practices to eat and defecate; to heal; to do something useful with your own hands; to sleep in the appropriate way; to settle in a place and caring for it, really in-habiting it... Most of the time, in his whole, rich, long and very active life, most of the time Gandhi used his amazing talents to discover and to test, to experience by himself, ways and means to live, ways and means meaningful and available for everyone all over India.

The Gandhi I do cherish the most is this Gandhi. In the current conditions of the world, we need of course alternatives to violence, to the nation state, to formal democracy, to technologies destroying both culture and environment... We need to impose limits, political controls, to violent, irrational and senselessness behavior of governments, corporations...and people. But we need, more than any other thing, to live our lives in a sensible and meaningful way, to know how to eat and how to dispose of our own physical, social or psychological shit, to know how to use our hands, to know how to heal and how to grief and how to love... I don't know of any other intellectual or political leader so concerned with these elements of the daily life, and so willing to first of all experience them by himself, in order to share with others the outcome.

Yes, this is at the end the Gandhi I cherish the most.