

El Encueñtro

I'm back from what was officially called The Second Encounter of the Zapatista Peoples with the Peoples of the World: Resistance and Rebellion for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism. Yesterday I sent out my column about the thing, and that was a lot of it, but by no means all of it. I apologize for the length of this email, and the length of the last one, and for the probable length of the next one that'll describe me settling in and actually starting to volunteer. But after that next one they'll probably get shorter cuz I'll probably be staying in one place doing the same things over and over instead of traveling around and having lots of different experiences.

For me personally the best thing about the *encueñtro* was that I met this woman who works with a Zapatista-influenced medical NGO in New Orleans that gives medical care to the heavily Hispanic workforce that's rebuilding the city, and in the process being exposed to lead and asbestos for six bucks an hour without protective gear. Oh, capitalism. When I asked her if they take volunteers she said yeah, they always need translators, and also, here's the kicker, a lot of the people they serve are *Chiapanecos*, so if I volunteered with them I'd be able to use the Tzeltal (that's a Mayan language) that I expect to learn over the next eight months. She said they've got one doctor who, having lived for two years in Zapatista territory, specifically in Oventic, is fluent in English, Spanish and Tzotzil, and that patients' faces just light up when the doctor starts speaking to them in their mother tongue. (Tzotzil is another Mayan language, one for which there exists a dictionary to translate between it and Spanish, which unfortunately is not the case with Tzeltal.) But that doctor is about to go on maternity leave, and none of the others even speak Spanish, so when I get back to the States I may go and volunteer there for my last couple months before medical school. (As a couple of you know, my previous plan had been to fly super super cheap as an air courier and come visit you in the Far East when I got back, but now I've got a choice between that and this, and I don't know which I'll end up doing.)

The meat of the *encueñtro* was presentations by Zapatistas about the work they do. There were many, many presentations because there's five *caracoles*; multiplied by several *municipios* from each *caracol* that sent presenters to the *encueñtro*; multiplied by the topics of health, education, the struggle of women, autonomy, good

government *juntas* and collective works; sometimes multiplied by multiple presenters per topic per *municipio*. That's why it took a week and a half. There are 38 autonomous municipalities in five *caracoles* (of which I think at least two are named for Che Guevara, of whom That Picture was constantly in view on a t-shirt, restaurant awning, pickup truck or whatever, the one taken by Alberto Korda at a Cuban funeral in 1960, the one the Maryland Institute of Art called, "The most famous photograph in the world and a symbol of the 20th century," the one that a moron at my school with a Che shirt identified as "the guy on Rage Against the Machine's amplifier.") Originally this *encuentro* was scheduled to go to all five *caracoles*, but thankfully they reduced the required travel by reducing it to three *caracoles* with presenters coming from the other two instead of the entire *encuentro* schlepping over. We spent time the *caracoles* of Oventic, Morelia and La Realidad.

We traveled between the *caracoles* in those pickup trucks I mentioned in the column, and the rides made me glad I'm young and durable. It's kinda fun to pretend that a piece of pipe is a chair because you get such splendid views if you ride on top. Overall Chiapas may have more natural beauty than any other place I've seen except Yellowstone National Park, but when we got back to the big city of San Cristóbal and took a cab to a hostel we all said oh my gods, these seats are big enough for your entire ass, they have cushions and they're so so luxuriously and unbelievably soft. The ride from Oventic to Morelia was a nice little four-hour jaunt or something like that, but then the ride from Morelia to La Realidad was awful, my worst experience so far. It was all the fault of cheap-ass gringo radicals who snuck onto the trucks without buying tickets. People didn't do that for the first trip because it's easy to get from Oventic back into the big city of San Cristóbal, and to get from San Cris out to Morelia. But La Realidad is remote. I heard a couple people say there'll be another *encuentro* in late December, so if anyone (who's also young and durable) wants to come visit me and can get the money to do so that would be a great time, I'd love to see some of you. But if you do so, don't be one of the assholes who screws up the transportation. Anyway, when we should have been ready to leave there were a bunch of legitimate ticket holders standing around with no spots left for them, so eventually the Zapatistas decided to just overload the trucks. We didn't leave until 1:45 in the afternoon, and then the trip, which I'd heard should take

some 7–10 hours, ended up taking more than 15 because overloaded trucks on bad roads get flat tires, and I heard that one broke an axle and another partially tipped. On the bright side I learned the choruses to several Latin American revolutionary and Spanish Republican songs, mainly from a great big laughing bear of a revolutionary journalist named Tomás. Outside of song though I could hardly understand a word he said though. He was a Spaniard from Valencia, and I couldn't get the hang of his accent. He really liked my squirrel story when I told it at two in the morning in the dark under a tarp in the back of the truck in the rain.

(If you're one of the people to whom I've never told my story about smuggling two flying squirrels on a domestic flight, it's pretty funny if you wanna read it in the NYU newspaper, who got me in trouble with the housing authorities by printing my real name without my permission.)

<http://media.www.nyunews.com/media/storage/paper869/news/2004/10/05/UndefinedSection/Illicit.Dorm.Pets.Dodge.The.Fuzz-2389371.shtml>

<http://media.www.nyunews.com/media/storage/paper869/news/2004/12/08/UndefinedSection/Second.Squirrel.Meets.Maker-2388675.shtml>

Our truck got a flat tire at four in the morning, and the driver said it happened because we have too much weight, everybody out and walk while I drive your suitcases to La Realidad. So we walked for a half hour until another truck came and got us for the last mile. Then as we tried to set up our tent I discovered that after skipping a night of sleep my bad Spanish comprehension had declined to nothing: when people tried to speak Spanish to me the sounds just wouldn't sort themselves out into words in my head. I don't think I've said yet that that José guy I interviewed for my column runs an NGO that owns an enormous 12-man tent that he brought. But it was occupied only by him and these two women in a one-year trial period to see if they could become nuns, and they all very nicely invited me to stay with them since I didn't bring a tent. One of the future nuns, Elizabeth, basically adopted me as a little brother for much of the *encuentro*, which was a very nice thing for her to do. In return I filtered water for them with my water filter. It wasn't that I

didn't trust the water the Zapatistas provided; rather, it was that I didn't have to trust it. But anyway that night she was trying to tell me that, although I'd registered in Oventic and hadn't had to register again in Morelia, I did have to register again in La Realidad, but I couldn't figure out what she was talking about. So she grabbed me by the wrist and led me to the registration line and stayed there until I finally figured out what was going on. Radical Christians are such unfailingly nice people.

I'd known that the word *caracol* literally means snail, and at the *encuentro* I asked around as to why this might be. I tried to interview a member of the good government junta of La Realidad, who could have given a more authoritative answer, but they asked me what I wanted to talk about, and when I said that had some questions about the good government juntas they said, well, there's a presentation about those tomorrow, go listen to that. Anyway, I got lots of answers. The spiral of a snail's shell looks separate from itself because there's those lines between the different rings, except it's not really because if you trace the spiral around it's all connected. Also you can think of a spiral as being in principle infinite in both directions. Also a snail is patient. Also if you lay a snail on its side the different rings of the spiral are all on the same level. So Zapatista states are called snails for all of those reasons, or none of them, or some of them, I still don't know.

In my experience I'm unique among English speakers learning Spanish in that I can speak Spanish better than I can understand it. For all the other native English speakers I've talked to since I left the States the opposite is true, lots of people complain with something like, "Well, I can understand what they're saying, I just don't know how to respond." But for me in the whole encuentro there was never a time when I wasn't able to say what I wanted to say, though it sometimes took a couple tries to get it in a comprehensible form, but I probably understood less than half of what people said to me. So for a lot of the first presentations I was kind of lost because I didn't know what the topic was, because most of the presentations started with something like this:

"Sisters and brothers, (male) comrades and (female) comrades, peoples of the world, members of civil society, (male) all and (female) all, nationals and internationals, adherents of the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, supporters of The Other

Campaign, (male) welcome and (female) welcome. I, coming from the autonomous Zapatista municipality of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, in the *caracol* of La Realidad, the first *caracol*, the mother of all the *caracoles*, am here to share with you my word about EDUCATION at this, the Second Encounter of the Zapatista Peoples with the Peoples of the World: Resistance and Rebellion for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, in the spirit of the ancestors, in the memory of Emiliano Zapata, in the *caracol* of La Realidad, the first *caracol* and the mother of all the others, on this Friday, the 27th of July, in the year of 2007, which is the 13th year of the Zapatista uprising, thank you, good morning and long live the struggle.”

Except without the emphasis on the word “education,” which it would have been very nice to have since it’s the only word that actually matters in all that. So if my ears didn’t pluck that one important word from the morass of salutations, formalities and revolutionary platitudes, then I would have to guess the topic from what the speaker was saying, which got easier as my comprehension improved over the course of the *encuentro* but which I initially wasn’t very good at. Fortunately, since the presenters were mostly Mayans for whom Spanish is a second language, they spoke *veeeeerrrrry* slowly and distinctly. (For you other Midwesterners, in terms of rate of speech and clarity of enunciation it was sort of like Garrison Keillor in Spanish.) But still, at first I could only understand what they were saying if I continuously gave the speaker 100% of my attention. I hadn’t realized how hard that is. Any little thing that I noticed would derail my attention, and then I’d be a little lost when I focused on the presentation again after noticing oh there’s a dog with engorged teats, there’s a guy with a weird haircut like mine except in dreadlocks, there’s a pretty girl, a baby’s crying, I forgot to put on sun screen. I wonder if this is what life in general is like for my dad and my little brother, who both have ADD. Anyway, because of this I initially found it much easier to understand the questions and answers that followed the talks than to follow the talks themselves, because each question and answer pair were self-contained. Just like at political speaking events in the States, overeducated leftists would ask complicated, overlong questions, but unlike a lot of speakers I’ve seen back home, the Zapatistas would often give monosyllabic answers to these questions, which were usually sufficient. Here are some examples that I approximately wrote down:

Q: When working for the health of the community, do you, knowing that knowledge of such sicknesses is particularly important for the health of women, give out information about sexual health to your patients so that they can protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS and other such infections that may harm them if they don't have sufficient and correct information?

A: Yes.

Q: I know this may be a difficult topic to discuss, but are there cases in which one Zapatista kills another Zapatista in liberated territory, and if so how do the community and the good government junta handle such cases?

A: No.

Q: In your work in the schools, in deciding what subjects and topics and lessons to teach to the children, do you sometimes let the children themselves help to make these decisions, so that they can have some influence over the things that they learn and the order in which they learn them?

A: Yes.

But there were other times when the Zapatistas clearly either didn't understand the questions or for some reason didn't want to answer them. I suspect the latter:

Q: Do you always use herbal medicine, or do you sometimes use allopathic medicine, and if so, in which cases do you use herbal medicine and in which cases do you use allopathic?

A: We use allopathic medicine when it is necessary.

Q: What do you do with a man who beats his wife?

A: This is the responsibility of the community.

Q: What is the penalty for rape?

A: Actually, rape is a very bad thing because it does not conform with the ideals of the community.

I especially like that last one; it's at once a completely unobjectionable platitude and a totally evasive *non sequitur*.

(“Andrew, did you carry out the garbage like I told you to?” “Why Mother, to keep an overflowing garbage can in the house is unhealthy and unhygienic.”) Overall I thought that the presentations were pretty unsurprising and that the Zapatistas are going about their work in about the same good and admirable way I expected. I did have one surprise in a talk on women’s struggles. The lady said, oh, everything was so much worse back before the uprising started in 1994, life was very much harder for women then, and I’m thinking, yes, yes, many, many Zapatista women have said this from the stage, and then she says for example many of us had to have 12 to 18 children. I turned to the person next to me and said, whoa, did she just say 12–18? And he’s like, yeah, that’s how it used to be.

Now two random funny things that are kinda gross, so skip this if you’re not into that kind of thing. First, when we got a flat tire by a lovely waterfall in the middle of the night on the way to La Realidad, a certain female acquaintance of mine who I won’t name reached into her bra, pulled something out, put it in her mouth, ate it, and said, “Oh, a Cheeto.” Second, an Austrian from Innsbruck told me that in Spain the verb *escoger* means “to take” or “to ride” and the noun *coche* means a car. But in Guatemala and southern Mexico the verb *escoger* means “to fuck” and the noun *coche* means a pig. I thought those were too good not to pass along.

I thought the coolest surprise at the *encuentro* was this person, known to me only as the silhouettes of two sets of fingers, who did sort of like Tibetan sand paintings at one of the big evening gatherings, except with only one color of sand and on a projector. So you could look up on a big screen and see sand and space, light and silhouette. And out of that the artist could make pretty much whatever she wanted: a train coming out of the horizon, a cactus, a leaping horse with rider, a naked woman, trees, three blocky faces, non-objective designs. And all amazingly fast, she’d just sprinkle sand on the projector fiddle with it for a few seconds and you’d say whoa, a ship in the ocean. I wish I had a video of it, it was pretty amazing to watch.

I suppose I should talk about Marcos. *Subcommandante* Marcos is the EZLN’s main spokesman. “Through my voice speaks the voice of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.” He says that, being a non-indigenous outsider, a *ladino*, he’s a *subcommandante*, in

contrast to the full *commandantes* who are indigenous, run the EZLN and compose the CCRI, or Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee. But nonetheless he's the world's most famous Zapatista, and opponents of the movement assert without evidence that he's some kind of dictator and wants to become the Pol Pot of Mexico. Historically, I understand that the EZLN is the result of a very small and fairly ordinary armed Marxist revolutionary acronym fleeing probable death or imprisonment if they stayed in the big cities, arriving in the Chiapan jungle in the 1980s to start the revolution, and then being changed very much politically by their encounter with Mayan culture and history as they recruited thousands of Mayans who now compose and run the organization. Anyway, Marcos was one of those original FLN guys from way back when, but apparently has a stronger literary background and much more of a gift for revolutionary phrase-making than the others.

I knew he'd arrived because suddenly the crowd was surging toward the moving point of Marcos and some of the CCRI walking toward the stage. People were standing on their chairs, and lots of camera flashes were going off. Marcos wears a black ski mask just like all the other Zapatistas. Oh, I may not have said yet that Zapatistas generally wear black ski masks, I guess originally to hide their identities from the government, though Marcos has said that, because indigenous people are invisible to Mexican racists, "We put on masks in order to be seen." But that's sort of their trademark, the Zapatista dolls that peddlers sell to tourists in the streets of San Cris are Zapatista dolls because they have ski masks, and during the *encueñtro* I saw kids as young as about four running around in the things. Anyway Marcos wears a ski mask like the rest of them, but you can tell who he is because he's like a head and part of a shoulder taller than the rest and smokes a pipe. The Mexican government says Marcos is the *nom de guerre* of a former UNAM [National University of Mexico] professor named Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, and I don't think he's ever confirmed or denied this. Instead, his self-definition is a lovely poetic evasion that reveals his misconception that San Francisco is a relatively tough place to be gay: "Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristóbal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10pm,

a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains.” This leads to the slogan “We are all Marcos.” So anyway, everyone got very excited when Marcos came out, but I unfortunately couldn’t understand most of what he said and didn’t agree with what I did understand. I’m pretty sure he said something about how they need to continue the struggle to honor the memory of their fallen comrades, which is a sentiment I don’t agree with because it works just as well to justify the continuation of every war that’s ever had casualties (“We must stay in Iraq forever or every dead American soldier will have died in vain.”) He also said a fair bit about the sun and the moon, but I couldn’t follow that part. Basically I’d been spoiled by all these Zapatista speakers who read prepared statements very slowly and deliberately, and then along comes this spontaneously articulate native speaker who speaks in poetry and metaphor, and I couldn’t really understand him. Maybe at the next *encuentro*.

So that’s about it. Remember that there’s gonna be another one of these things around the next new year, so if anyone wants to come visit and see Zapatista uprising for themselves I’d enthusiastically recommend attending. After a week and half in liberated territory I’d say I prefer good politics and bad toilets over the familiar American reverse.

Andrew