Introduction

Utopia, contrary to what current usage suggests, is characterized by its relation to present historical reality... Utopia necessarily means a denunciation of the existing order... But utopia is also an announcement, an announcement of what is not yet, but will be; it is the forecast of a different order of things, a new society... [Utopia is] the driving force of history and subversive of the existing order. If utopia does not lead to action in the present, it is an evasion of reality.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, Theology of Liberation (1988)

The Time of the No, the Time of the Yes... We defined the “no,” we still haven’t fully delineated the “yes”... “Could it be another way?” This question could be the one that sparks rebellion and its broader acceptance. And this could be because there is a “no” that has birthed it: it doesn't have to be this way... We have gotten to this point because our realities, histories, and rebellions have brought us to this “it doesn't have to be this way.” This and also because, intuitively or by design, we have answered “yes” to the question, “could it be another way?” We still need to respond to the questions we encounter after that “yes.” What is that other way, that other world, that other society that we imagine, that we want, that we need? What do we have to do? With whom? If we don’t know the answers to those questions we have to look for them. And if we have them, we have to make them known among ourselves.

Zapatista Communication, “Them and Us, Part v—‘The Sixth’” (Feb. 2013)

1 Utopia and the Dialectic as Contested Terrain

December 21, 2012. (Mayan calendar, the end of an era and the beginning of a new one)—In a disciplined, silent outpouring, 45,000 Indigenous Zapatistas (Tzeltales, Tzotziles, Tojolobales, Choles, Zoques, and Mames) occupied the streets of five cities in Chiapas: “Did you listen? It is the sound of your world crumbling. It is the sound of our world resurging. The day that was day, was night. And night shall be the day that will be day. Democracy! Liberty! Justice!” read their communiqué. The occupation was followed by a series of communications from Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos and others in the name of the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee—General Command of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN).
Among those documents was “The Sixth,” (referring to the Sixth Declaration from the Selva Lacandona, Zapatista Army of National Liberation 2005), quoted in the epigraph of this Introduction. In referring to “the time of the No and the time of the Yes,” the Zapatistas speak to the dual rhythm of uprooting social transformation—the destruction of the old and the creation of the new—that has characterized humanity’s fight for freedom for generations, centuries, indeed millennia. In this sense the Zapatista project and utopian vision is aligned, as well, with the dialectic, the philosophic expression that gave word to the emancipatory struggle of women and men throughout history. The absolute negativity of the dialectic was a revolution in thought that G.W.F. Hegel forged under the impact of the great French Revolution, and that Karl Marx transformed into a philosophy of revolution—revolution in permanence. Whether the Zapatistas actively discerned liberatory threads implicit between their ideas and actions and those of Hegel and of Marx is not the crucial question. The dialectic is in life and not alone in books.

However today, it is crucial to make explicit these threads between the rebellions and revolutionary beginnings of the here and now and the philosophy of human emancipation that Hegel and then Marx forged. When we grasp and practice this dialectic of absolute negativity, negation of the negation—the positive (the “yes”) inside the negative (the “no”)—we can reach toward new human beginnings, the creation of a world that contains within the place/space for the many worlds that humanity is in its very being.

This dialectic is not a static entity, imposed externally as “the answer.” Rather, it is a way of thinking and doing, “the power of negativity” that comes alive again and again, when human beings, rebels and revolutionaries, the vast social movements from below, re-create it in their practices and thinking. Working out for our day such a historically grounded world view of freedom goes hand in hand with having our eyes and ears, our energies and efforts, on the ongoing movements from below. It is their voices and actions that are the source of emancipatory change, as it is the methodology of the revolutionary dialectic that gives us the ability to comprehensively grasp the significance of the movements from below. The two labors of discerning the meaning of philosophy and of action are not two separate tasks, but one and the same.

To recover and recreate the dialectic is to root ourselves in what has been the praxis of humanity throughout history. It is this practice, this method, which the rulers, strive to keep hidden from us. As well, many activists seeking revolutionary change have, unfortunately, ignored, or mystified emancipatory philosophy. To become practicing dialecticians, is not to possess “the word” in any elitist, vanguardist manner. Rather, it is to bring together as one, humanity’s historical struggles for freedom expressed as method and the here and now of our determination to uproot the old and create the new: Utopia and the dialectic in fusion.