

ANOTHER WORLD IS HERE: BUILDING AUTONOMY AND RESILIENCE IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO

With Rita Valencia, Podcast #2

Stefani: We will now begin with the second podcast in a two part series by interviewing Rita Valencia to discuss the role of activists in alliance with the Zapatista movement. If you missed the first podcast, please tune in to the first podcast to hear about the history of the Zapatista movement with Alberto Vallejo Reyna a history professor and anthropologist in San Cristobal de las Casas a city in Chiapas Mexico. In the words of our Professor of the course Another World is Possible, Building Autonomy and Resilience in Chiapas, “Alberto Vallejo Reyna gave us a political-economic analysis and historical overview of the Zapatista movement and the social conditions that led up to the 1994 insurgency, describing ways in which the Zapatista Movement builds autonomy while engaging in a process of pedagogical encounter with the Other, including the non-human. In this podcast, Rita Valencia also highlights the social-historical, local and global contexts of the 1980's and the 1990s that gave rise to the insurrection as part of a long history of resistance to colonial domination. She reflects on the role of the current generations of activists within a longer process of social change that extends beyond notions of our individual lifetimes, in which a new internationalism enacting a paradigm shift needs to be quickly built in order for us to collectively confront our current crises. They both stress the need for different struggles to come together, to come to trust and learn from each other—across species, plants, mountains, and time.”

Stefani: Hi Rita. Thank you for joining us. It's so great to have you here with us today. Could you give us a little background about yourself. Where are you from and how did you come to live in Chiapas? What types of activism are you currently involved in within Chiapas?

Rita: I'm part of a generation that I have always heard and always lived under some kind of an economic crisis. I grew up in the post-socialist or existing socialist era. While I was growing up

I saw the end of the Berlin Wall. So that was more or less like the world in which I grew up. Everything was more or less like that a leftist movement. There was a certain sense of nostalgia for the revolution that hadn't been possible and I would say until basically like the first of January of 1994 when Mexico was being told that they were finally making it to the first morning thanks to the NAFTA Agreement, and then what no one actually thought was possible. The impossible happened. The Zapatista uprising. So I think that like, for me, and for some people within my generation that was basically something that really changed our world view and also gave a different meaning with what we want to do with our lives. I have to say that it's not a big number of people. But I think that it is kind of like important. I think that, it will take a few more decades to (understand) the significance of that uprising and the way which humankind is going to be shaped and has been shaped by basically the last decades of the 20th century and the 21st century.

Stefani: How did all of these uprisings affect you and how did you end up living in Chiapas?

Rita: What I can say is that like, now that I'm actually much older and I sort like reflect on these processes now. I see it as a continuation of not only of basically what has happened in the 20th century and leftist movements in Latin America. But I see it more in terms of right now the continuation of an ongoing war against the people and that's something that started like 500 years ago. It is, I think that like perhaps, the most sort of like important outcome is that right now I am reflecting on these processes as something that is something beyond my lifetime and my generation. It's something that I didn't start either or that my generation didn't start either. It's basically to understand time and history in a much more complex and sort of like long-term history and that's something that like for me it's really unique because we are basically told not to think in those terms. We are at best, we can only think and plan within our lifetimes and that's basically the best case scenario and so to think beyond that. It's really like, it involves a sort of epistemological change and ontological change at will and yeah, I think that that would be for me the richest part of this process.

Stefani: How have you seen Activists around the world respond to what is happening in Chiapas?

Rita: It's actually quite (quite) different. I think that in the 90's this sense of the world over. It's kind of like history has been written and we have to only like live through it. I think that at the same time, the literal policies were sweeping across the globe. It was basically in the late 80's and beginning of the 90's that the structural adjustment programs were implemented in Africa and Latin America. Many other countries were like recovering from like {censorships}so on and so forth. So, after sort of like other attempts we failed up to a certain extent for example. Even the revolution was a long way away. It was complicated and I think that like Europe was also going through an interesting experience in the 90's. The Zapatista uprising was basically like a wake-up call. It was a way of showing that like things could still be done that... yeah, I don't know. It was possible to like re-write history and that those who could re-write history specialists or anything like that who were basically like the most forgotten people on earth and that's basically like the indigenous populations. The indigenous people. I think that like in the nineties, there was a very interesting response to that anti-globalization movement also protests from the Siatra. The Siterra in Brazil, also like spreading. It was basically like, I think a moment when things really. I don't know there was a lot of hope in resistance, but then again we're right now in 2018 and a lot has happened since then. I think the response now is different. I think that now we are living a very complicated times, a very difficult time. We are basically seeing fascism spreading all over the world. We need to have a wave of creative responses that are not mediated by the mistakes or by false discourse... so I think that like there is a lot of learning and organizing to be done.

Stefani: How have you seen Activists around the world respond to what is happening in Chiapas and what is their local involvement in the Zapatista movement?

Rita: I think that basically there has been an incomplete generational change. I think that there were many support groups that were formed in the 90's in basically in Europe or in other countries well in the United States. There is even a group in Australia. I think that basically like, it is quite interesting because there is quite a lot of experience that has been sort of like gathered through many years of working in what could be considered different contexts. For example, in terms of just to give you a very good example. I was involved for a while in a support group in the United Kingdom. It's kind of like complicated to talk about the Zapatista's, and Chiapas, and Mexico within the UK. It's not within its own sort of like colonial history. People there feel

much closer to Africa or the subcontinent. Latin America is this exotic warm place where people go to dance salsa and like basically more or less ruled by different kinds of like dictatorships and so on and so forth. So the view, I would say, this is a generalization of course, but they have like indigenous people. It's something that like seems to me that it comes from the 19th century or something like that. So people would be really surprised when you talk to them about the Zapatistas for example, in 2005-2006. They would say: Are they still around? Do they still exist? What happened to Marcos? Those would be like the main questions. And I think that like, this is basically like the nature of a very important part of any learning process that needs to be done, I think in the first world. It seems most of the time that like what we experienced in Mexico or what the Zapatistas are trying to do is like the result of some kind of like system failure. It's like things are like this basically because we have a very corrupt government. We don't have like a proper legal systems. We don't have like proper democratic institutions and so on and so forth. (16:55) So, I think that that the very uneducated not in an academic sense but in a very non-reflective, that's actually better. The non-reflective answer is: 'How can I help these poor people that are suffering in the mountains in Southern Mexico?' That's such a colonial viewpoint.

Stefani: How do we change that view point?

Rita: Oh, that's basically like a good, interesting, and difficult question to answer. I think that like precisely that that view comes from a lack of reflection as I was saying. I think that like one of the first steps for me is to let people know and understand that like it's not like we Mexicans or we Latin Americans or we people from the global south or from the third world or whatever surname we have or will have from the future. We are not corrupt because our cultures are corrupt or because that's part of like our history or so on and so forth. What happens is basically that they are fulfilling the place that the global colonial and modern system has given to us and we also need to understand that like every single government and I'm talking about like the government of the UK, Spain, France, Germany, or the United States are as corrupt. The level of corruption is different. It works in a different way. But it's not a matter of helping us or helping the indigenous people or anything like that. It's a matter of basically joining a struggle for liberation for our own liberation and from the different kinds of oppression that we experience every day and that we re-produce every day. And that has to do with like our patriarchal system.

That has to do with our capitalist system. It's much more complex than just helping people out. I think that like one of the things that we need to understand is that the like the aide industry is in fact the colonialist industry.

Stefani: And how did the Zapatistas exit the system?

Rita: Well, um, I don't think that like anyone has really been able to build something completely different. I think that like the Zapatistas have been doing what I consider one of the most advanced social experiments of the 20th century which is basically like trying to re-create a different form of existence. A different form of economy of like social relations and so forth and so on. Basically rooted as I said in at least 500 years of resistance and that's why I think that's basically why if anything, more than helping them, we need to learn from them. I don't think anyone has re-created an exit and they are very clear about that. There are no recipes or instructions for this. Part of the problem is that it is really complicated. Each one of us needs to find a path or walk through different paths to create this form of liberation of finding a different way of relating to each other and to nature and to live in a different way. There isn't like a recipe basically. It's complicated. Each of us needs to figure out how we're going to do that – collectively - which is also very important.

Stefani: Right, I love that. Thank you so much. I love that you said more than helping them, we need to learn from them and to create a different way of relating to one another. One of the things that I've learned from the Zapatista's is that they have seven principles that they live by which are:

1. To obey not command
2. To represent not supplant
3. To step down and not climb
4. To serve but not help one's self
5. To convince not defeat
6. To construct not destroy
7. To propose not impose

And I'm curious, how have you used the practices and principles of the Zapatista movement in your own activism and projects that you're involved in? And how can activists around the world utilize these principles to organize?

Rita: I think that like it is sort of like a Utopia but it is also like a practice. I think you can get very philosophical with this. It's a matter of trying to become basically the best personal version of yourself and that also means of yourselves. Really try to live within this sort of like deep and ethical principles but I think that like the power of these principles also comes from the Utopian side of them and I think that like it would be very interesting and more important for people listening to this podcast than to hear how this happens in Mexico. What would you think that each of these principles would mean in the United States for example? What kind of government do you envision that could come out of utilizing these principles? That is my question for you. I know that like, it's not supposed to be the case the interviewee is not supposed to be the interviewer. But I think that just from listening to the principles I think that like, for me, it would be mind-blowing especially like considering all of the things that have been going on lately, like for example, Trump saying that the United States shouldn't accept people from like El Salvador because they are like shitty countries. Did you hear that? Yeah. So, just like there is the disrespect that there is for human life needs to be confronted with something so powerful and ethical as like these principles. What would something like To Obey and not to command mean there? Right. So introducing these principles to various organizations as a basis for ethical and moral conduct to lead by example. To start with but also as sort of like a Utopia. Just imagine that you have a government that isn't going up but going to the basis to ground society that would be extremely important and meaningful and having the different levels of people living in the streets with no health system with no access. I mean all of the things that are happening there. It's just like completely sort of like appalling to think of how to build something completely different and that it's not basically like based on a democratic system where people are basically not represented. Not only that, but people are taken for granted basically. I think that is something that came up in the conversation. There is this total disconnection between your local representatives and basically like normal people. I think that that's for me the most important thing.

Stefani: It seems like a shift in our culture, so capitalism promotes, it's all about me and it's very self-serving. How is this going to benefit me and How is this 'I' movement, whereas it seems in other culture specifically the indigenous culture they come from a 'we' mentality. So, how can America shift from the "I" mentality to the "we" mentality where we all take care of one another and we integrate these principles into our culture?

Rita: Well, I don't think that there is a straight answer for that either. I think that that is basically what people there need to start doing. It's the same here in Mexico. I think that that's an essential part of the colonial modern project the supremacy of the individual. How do we create something different? It is very complicated because we are not used to basically like taking responsibility for our decisions. I think that like one of the tools of the capitalist system uses is making things invisible. I also shared this with you that part of our task is to make these invisible things visible again and try to live accordingly. It is a massive cultural shift. I think that however, we also need to take this sort of social experiment very seriously. Basically the environment crisis is going to leave us no other option. Sometimes I'm criticized for having an apocalyptic view of the future however, I believe the future is rather oblique. We need to start learning how to rely on each other, how to organize for basic survival and we need to take responsibility for the chaos that we have created. But also, we need to take into account that like we are not alone as a species in the chaos. So, there are many, many things we need to start like changing radically. And, this is basically the enormity of the task that we have ahead because no one else is going to do it. No international organization or national government or anything. I mean we are really like headed towards a major disaster. The IPCC, like no one is actually doing what needs to be done. It is a matter of survival. Individuals might think like some rich folks may think that they can pay their way out of this but I don't think that that's really an option either. So, I think that we are standing at the top of a cliff at a very very scary cliff. And, this cultural change in which we need to stop thinking about the "I" and we start thinking and acting as a "we" and as an expanded "we" as a "we-species" but also as an inter-species "we" needs to happen very, very fast. We don't have like much time to dwell. It's scary. We need to feel this trust and this sort of like international solidarity as fast as we can basically. I think that like, we have from like 5 to 10 years to like really do something to save ourselves from like fascism basically. The fascist ways in which we are right now and to think about our future as a species and as a planet. I think.

Stefani: It's very clear that the government and the people in powerful positions are not going to save us from the decline that's taking place within global climate change. How can activists around the world organize, create communities and build coalitions that are in support of the anti-capitalist, anti-globalist movement moving forward. Do you have any specific ideas or strategies that you've used in your own personal life as it relates to creating collectives or communities in Chiapas?

Rita: I think that like, as I've said, one of the most important things is to really like spread the sense of urgency. And, we need to be prepared to come out from our comfort zone. But basically, it's complicated. It's the basis of the capitalist system. And then, other than that, I think that it is also very important. It's one of the pillars of this fascist system in which we are right now. We need to revive what was very famous during the Spanish civil war and in different Latin American movements which was International Solidarity and a sense of internationalism. That sense defeats exactly the opposite of what we're seeing now which is xenophobia. This whole movement against immigrants. We need to understand that migrants are the first millions of people being displaced by one or another by climate change. We need to understand that they are refugees and that they are the first ones that need our solidarity and support. And this is something I think that people of the west and people in the first world should really feel ashamed about the number of refugees that have been dying. We need to think. We need to do some serious thinking about global activism when we look at the numbers of people that are right now dying in either the sea or the Mediterranean Sea or the northern border or in Mexico. It's also turning into a graveyard. A massive graveyard of migrants. It's one of the first very basic humanitarian steps that we should be doing. Like seriously. What are we doing to do something about this political humanitarian and environmental crisis of millions of people being displaced. Other than that, we need to also start to believe in becoming better versions of ourselves and to start trusting one another because I don't think we have many options for survival. We need to start doing that, but those are just, I don't think I have a better understanding than.

Stefani: What do you see as the current ambitions of the Zapatista Movement moving forward?

Rita: I think that like they are overall extremely generous because since the first of January 1994, they were very clear that some blood needed to be shed in order to change things. They

decided that that blood was going to be theirs. That was an important fact that we must not forget. We can not sort of like idealize things beyond a certain point. People that you know that have been put in prison but most importantly killed for trying to be coherent with their ideas with things and their commitment towards things. I think that since then, they have been coming for different movements and encounters or gatherings or whatever. They have been trying to really move into the agenda in an international context and this is basically what is also happening right now to the Indigenous Government Council. It is also trying to form, a strong council within the whole of Mexico all the indigenous people to basically defend their territories and their ways of living and also to expand that to people living in cities that are also being oppressed by the capitalist system. This is basically what is happening on the national level.

2018 is going to be a very, very complicated and intense year. We have an electoral year. A Narco Government. We're seeing militarization of police forces and security basically and it's happening within this context. It's basically happening with social discontent and immobilization. And as I've said it's not only happening here. It's a global trend. In the same way in which there is a global trend of violence against women. These are all really different cards of the current ways of the capitalist system in which we live in. What the Zapatistas are doing is trying to connect with other movements that are also resisting. I think that what we need to be doing. We need to as I said before transmit the sense of urgency. They say that they are trying to unite our collective sorrow and our collective rage. I think this is basically what we ought to be doing. If you talk to people who have basically who have had a member of their family disappear or a victim of the feminist side or any of these issues what you're bound to see is pain and rage. That pain and that rage takes different shapes and forms in other geographies in other countries but there is a lot of pain and rage. So what we need to do is organize that pain. Organize that rage. The idea is to organize that pain and to organize that rage and transform it into a dignified construct of something different. (45:43)

Hadley: It seems we have this globalized economic model, we have globalized colonization that is kind of changing the way that it is manifesting but is still perpetuating the same history of exploitation of people and of land and of water and of species and these different areas. And then currently we have more localized struggles that are happening in different areas of the globe. And if I'm hearing you correctly, I hear that you're saying that kind of need to reverse that

model and have more localized economic systems, localized systems of governance but globalizing the struggle and the movement to achieve those localized forms of existence.

Rita: That's absolutely right and I think we need to learn from like the previous cycle of like struggle is that this isn't something that is going to happen because the enlightened ones basically a political party or group or whatever is going to come and save us. That is one of the myths that social democracy was built on and we need to understand that that is not going to be the case anymore. I mean I'm just thinking for example about what happened in Western Europe for example or in Eastern Europe rather, when the socialist block was like dismantled. It was a matter of getting the bad guys out in order to get the good guys in and they like change things. What we have to understand is that no one is going to change anything. We need to do it ourselves. That's not going to happen through a vote. I'm sorry if I say something, but I don't think even Bernie Sanders is going to save anyone either. It needs to really come from us.

Stefani: I think that was the big take away that I had from visiting Chiapas. And also, just within the past years, having that realization that you just spoke to that no one is coming to save us. I think that really is a myth that is deeply permeated in the culture in the United States and probably in other areas too that the technological genius or the government, the good government or a politician will come in to save the day. And it really is a hard realization to realize that no one is coming. It really is just us and it's very terrifying to think that which is probably why people don't want to. But I agree with you that one of the big takeaways that I had from visiting Chiapas and the Zapatista's was that our current system of governance, of government, in the United States it's just way too big and it doesn't make any sense that someone who doesn't know the problems that you and I are facing locally should be making decisions about those problems. It should come from us. It should come from the people who are actually facing the problems themselves which is something the Zapatista's have really built their model of governance around is that the decision making should happen close to the people who are affected by those decisions.

Rita: Absolutely. It is terrifying also because like culturally we have been fed otherwise and the theory of like heroes, of finding someone with a superpower. I think that like that in political terms that is basically like the specialists. So, that also answers the question about why I don't

want to talk a lot about myself. I don't consider myself important in really many ways. I have done the things that I thought needed to be done and I don't think that I'm that important. I don't have more knowledge than a lot of people do. It's just we need to dismantle this idea that someone knows. I might have a bit more like experience because of the years of what I have been doing but that's about it.

Hadley: I think you are a very very important part of the collective struggle.

Rita: Basically yes. I think so.

Stefani: (52:13) I think the biggest take away for me is that there is a sense of urgency and we need to take our individual struggles and come together locally to organize among ourselves to create collective change so that there is a tipping point both locally and globally.

Rita: Gee, yeah, that's about right and basically do it as if there is no tomorrow. We are running out of time.

Stefani: Is there anything you would like to add as a basis for this podcast or inspire people around the world that might be listening to this who are activists to join the struggle?

Rita: Not that I can think of. I think it's more important that actions talk better than words. We need to see things changing rapidly. There is a need for discourse in order to do that. There is a deeper need of actions of actually having localized food systems in place that are healthy and nutritious and affordable food for people. We need to have health systems that are run by doctors and non-doctors and people with knowledge. There are so many things that need to be done. We really need to build and have these networks like working very very soon. So, there are loads of things that need to be done. It's also a great moment for being creative and open and we just really need to just start doing it.

Hadley: Join the experiment!

Stefani: Yeah, on that note, let's do it.

Hadley, Rita, Stefani: Laughter

Stefani: Well thank you so much for joining us and for all of your insight about the Zapatista movement. We sincerely appreciate your time and look forward to connecting and becoming activists together.

Rita: Yes, I think that we like we really need to start to get our act together because we need people all over the world doing things so yeah. Great. Thank you so very much for your interesting questions.

Stefani: We hope that you enjoyed this interview with Rita Valencia, an activist working with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. This is the second podcast of a two part series. If you missed the first podcast, we invite you to listen to that podcast which features Alberto Vallejo Reyna, an Anthropologist and Historian of Chiapas, Mexico who discusses the historical and global context of the Zapatista movement. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Charlotte Sáenz who created the course: Another World is Possible: Building Autonomy and Resilience in Chiapas at the California Institute of Integral Studies. We can't thank her enough for creating one of the most transformative experiential learning experiences that we've ever had in our entire lifetimes. If you have the opportunity to enroll in this course as an elective, we highly recommend it. Thanks again!