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EXISTENTIAL CRISIS: CHIAPAS AND JOURNEY TO THE DEEP ENDS OF SELF

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THESE THOUGHTS ARE MORE THAN A REFLECTION ABOUT MY EXPERIENCE IN CHIAPAS. IT IS AN ATTEMPT TO UNLOAD AND GIVE SOME REST TO MY SOUL FROM MY CURRENT EXISTENTIAL CRISIS.

Chiapas hit me with a syncretism of excess, contradiction and a bad case of Moctezuma's revenge. San Cristóbal is a microcosm where creativity is seen and felt for those looking for a revolution, redemption, a better world, Indian crafts, good tequila, authentic Mexican food and world class cuisine, hallucinogen fungi or an European hook up. It is in this space where the indigenous and poor people learn to survive and coexist with the first world. They build cheap houses, sell crafts, rise up in social movements and attempt to escape from modernity's spell.

The Dutch girl playing guitar and asking for money, while a five year old tries to sell me cigarettes seems a little out of place. Yet, I have to remind myself that a world where many worlds fit may not always please me. I ask myself, where do I fit? Where does a short DePaul trip really go? Should I go to a bad tequila bar and drown my consciousness in cheap beer and mezcals? Should I wander through the streets and become an Indian vigilante? Maybe join the coffee table revolutionaries?

I am sincerely confused by the things I hear about indigenous struggles and their achievements and what I had seen in my previous visit in 1994. Many believe that indigenous people have been dignified in Chiapas and Mexico. Cynically, I ask myself, how much of this change is real, how much dignity is here? Is Chiapas an optical illusion of indigenous freedom and earned respect for first people's rights? Are the San Andres accords being respected? As I try to eat my dinner with my friend at a bad tapas place, a guy harasses a Tzotzil kid shining a German woman's shoes, she and her husband have to endure a speech by a self proclaimed Indian hating Mexican, he yells that Indian poverty is nothing but a myth in Chiapas and all of Mexico. I
almost gave him a piece of my restorative hiking boot but he left. At least San Cristóbal shows some tolerance in the eyes of visitors, the realities that I see later on this trip while in DF are drastically opposite, the same occurs as I walk through my hometown in Querétaro where I know of and have witnessed many abuses towards the first peoples. There, I see a pretty colonial town that proclaims to be proud of its indigenous roots, but there are no Indians and they are not allowed to walk in downtown, the Mexican version of gentrification is taking place.

Going back to Chiapas, as we visited various communities and travel through “Sancris” outskirts I start to witness the silent realities away from the tourists’ view. When coming back from the Mayan medicine museum and our cab takes a different route, we encounter a new camp of displaced people occupying a piece of land by force. These people are holding a meeting as we go by. My classmate jokes about being around to witness something new and exciting. I am too cynical to join the conversation. Sadly, two days later, I find myself skeptical, even more cynical and scared by the larger police presence on the streets and the news on TV showing the same site and the same people I saw being removed by force by the federal police. I feel uneasy of how easy it is to sense things brewing here. This, I start to think is just training for something else. My diagnosis of Mexico is that of a country under extreme stress. Every conversation that I have with people by inertia goes into the topic of the militarization of the country and the de facto war against selected drugs cartels and even more selected activists through the Plan Mérida. This initiative’s inconvenient truth is that, following a doctrine of national security, the victims of human rights abuses do not have access to the institutions that impart justice. The courts to deal with these issues are military not civilian. This plan is the perfect opportunity to send the social leaders to maximum-security prisons, the same places where high profile drug dealers like famous drug lord Chapo Guzmán can walk out whenever they feel they can be extradited to the US. Sadly, this is not a new reality for states like Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas; it is just a justification of the status quo, this time under the umbrella of fighting crime. I can’t avoid going back to the people I saw settling by force and marinating in the images of them being beaten and their makeshift houses burned down.

I struggle constantly from having my heart open during this trip. I feel energized by the people from Otros mundos and their initiatives, CIEPAC informational work as modern jugglers and the coffee coops. I feel so much humility in the presence of the people keeping alive the memory of those who died in Acteal. I grow hopeful when I walk trough the Zapatista caracol and see community work alive. I finally lose all my sanity when I witness what I call the most beautiful display of wisdom and strength in my life. Mujeres Unidas Para el Desarrollo is having its international woman’s day event and our friend and guide Marina has been invited to speak. Over five hundred women are gathering to share on topics such as their sexual and political rights; they follow indigenous protocol and acknowledge the elders, they make sure that everyone gets to share some water and drinks and show special forces efficiency when forming columns. This is all done in Spanish and two indigenous languages. Being there brought healing to my core, I saw my grandma among all the “Jefas” and cried both of joy and by acknowledging that what I see corroborates what my heart has always known, that amazing things occur when people have in mind not personal interest but the health, well being, and happiness of their community. As I talk with my friend Naomi about this experience, I become very present to the concept of solidarity. This simple idea cannot only be motivating to others but very healing and liberating for the self.

However, if I allow my cynical self to flow, my anguish is bare-naked. I can’t hide my lack of patriotism. Mexico feeds my soul and fucks me up. It drains my energy and gives me hope. It numbs my feelings, yet it makes me grow. The aftermath of the wave of feelings takes me to the following conclusion: The Mexican state doesn’t like what it sees. It wants to protect markets and interests. Chiapas is just a microcosm of what happens in the rest of the world and the powers that be want to turn it into a controlled tourism zone where even revolution is part of the tourist packages.

And out of being present to the enduring beauty of the people in Chiapas, embodied by the kid selling chiclets in the plaza and the gringo making earth blocks at the Zapatista community, the five hundred women in council talking about their rights, the French woman finding joy in playing capoeira in front of the churches and the fiery conviction of youth, that something occurs in me. I can finally see that the wool skirts and embroidered shawls are more beautiful than any corporate suits. That posh and candles are stronger than presidential declarations or military operations, and that passion, life and love can’t be traded in the market. In this developing cultural pluralism that is Chiapas today, in this developing Mexico with bourgeoisie dreams, in this evolving world all I can do is to listen and pay attention to other’s efforts devoutly with my heart, to then share myself and share the dream of a new tomorrow, of a great everything, de un gran todo...

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PHOTO provided by Yolotecuti Eha Luta Hoksila (Tomas Ramirez).