

Solidarity, or the third shoulder

The moon appeared on the shoulder of the night, but for barely a moment. The clouds separated, like curtains being drawn apart, and then the nocturnal body flaunted its tracing of light. Yes, like the mark a tooth leaves on the shoulder when, in the flight of desire, you don't know whether you're falling or rising.

Twenty years ago, after struggling up the first hill in order to go into the mountains, I sat down at a bend in the road. It was the dawn. I saw a gentleman with a sack of maize on his back, going up the hill. I don't know how long I was sitting there, but after a while the gentleman passed by again, going downhill now, and now without his burden. But the gentleman was still walking hunched over.

About a year later I met Old Antonio. We stopped in front of a stream, waiting for dawn to break. I don't quite remember how it came up in our talk, but Old Antonio explained to me that the indigenous always walk as if they were hunched over, even if they aren't carrying anything, because they carry the good of the other on their shoulders.

I asked how that was, and Old Antonio told me that the first gods, the ones who gave birth to the world, made the men and women of maize in such a way that they always walked collectively. And he told me that walking collectively also meant thinking about the other, about the *compañero*. "That is why the indigenous walk bent over," Old Antonio said, "because they are carrying on their shoulders their hearts and the hearts of everyone."

I thought then that two shoulders wouldn't be enough for that weight.

Time passed, and, with it, passed what passed. Our first defeat was in the face of these indigenous. They and we walked bent over, but we did so because of the weight of pride, and they because they were also carrying us (although we didn't realize it). Then we became them, and they became us. We began to walk together, bent over, but all of us knowing that two shoulders were not enough for that weight. And so we rose up in order to seek another shoulder which would help us walk, that is, to exist.

Three Shoulders

As with the origin of the nation, the contemporary history of the indigenous communities also has its founding legend: those who inhabit these lands now have three shoulders.

To the two shoulders that the usual human beings have, we have added a third: that of the national and international civil societies.

But now I want to tell you that all we have achieved has been possible because someone gave us their shoulder.

We believe that we have been fortunate. From its beginnings, our movement has had the support and kindness of hundreds of thousands of persons on the five continents. This kindness and this support has not been withdrawn, even in the face of personal limitations, of distances, of differences of culture and language, borders and passports, of differences in political concepts, of the obstacles put up by the federal and state governments, the military checkpoints, harassment and attacks, of the threats and attacks by paramilitary groups, of our mistrust, our lack of understanding of the other, of our clumsiness.

No, in spite of all of that, the civil societies of the world have worked because of, for and with us.

And they have done so not out of charity, nor out of pity, nor out of political fashion, nor out of a desire for publicity, but because they have, in one way or another, embraced a cause which is still, for us, great: the building of a world where all worlds fit, a world, that is, which carries the hearts of everyone.

Many people have come. All of them have put their shoulders next to the communities' two shoulders in order to begin to radically change the living conditions of the indigenous.

The third shoulder of the indigenous struggle has many colours, it speaks many languages, sees with many looks, and walks with many others.

Any mention of the "third shoulder" would not be complete without mentioning those who, even though silence might have suggested losing the way, have remained attentive and willing to try and understand what is being fought for here.

Listening to what the other says and, above all, to what he does not say, is only possible among those who share the path and, at times, the burden.

And I am referring to those who, while certainly having more important things to do, find the time and the attentiveness necessary for listening and seeing those who are not generally heard or seen.

Like many men and women who support the struggle of the Indian peoples they do not look at or listen to the indigenous peoples because it is fashionable or out of media considerations. Their path goes beyond that of just work. It has to do with what some call an "ethic of commitment," and it is in keeping with the desire for a real and just change, and not with the desire for economic and/or political gains.

We are sending all of you an embrace, just one, but one of those which can only be given between brothers, and which says things which cannot be said. We ask for the same at the moment of cutting the cake which, no matter how large it may be, we know will never be the size of the heart which you carry.

And thanks for the third shoulder.

This beautiful piece of writing is an edited version of a longer one produced in the mountains of the Mexican South-East in August 2004. It expresses very well the true nature of solidarity.