

Durito III: The Story of Neoliberalism and the Labor Movement



During the period of the new peace talks between the government and the EZLN, Marcos and Durito discuss the relationship between neoliberalism and the labor movement. Intimidated by the rank and file agitation and massive public support for the Zapatistas, the government and its longtime labor boss Fidel Velázquez had called off, for the first time in 75 years, the traditional May Day celebrations and parade to Mexico City's Zócalo. Furious, with all the injured pride of a passionate knight-errant, Durito proposes traveling on his steed, a turtle named Pegasus, to Mexico City to challenge Velázquez to a duel.

To the weekly news magazine *Proceso*
To the national newspaper *El Financiero*
To the national newspaper *La Jornada*
To the local newspaper of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, *Tiempo*
April 15, 1995

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Sirs:

Here is a communiqué for vespers. In this place, April plays at disguising itself like March, and May begins to flutter about some stray flowers, with their red color resplendent amidst so much green. I cannot stop keeping and losing hope among so many crickets. Meanwhile, I plan on founding the society of Tired Lungs Anonymous. I'm sure it would be quite successful in D.F.¹ But, by the time this happens, Holy Week will, once again, be an ordinary week. How much longer will the lie prevail?

Vale. Salud, and a mouthful of this fresh air that, they say, is breathed in the mountains and that some displaced people call "hope."

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

P.S. that continues righting wrongs at dawn and offers to a far-away maiden a little bouquet of red carnations hidden in a story called . . .

Durito III: Neoliberalism and the Labor Movement

The moon is a pale almond. Sheets of silver re-shape trees and plants. Zealous crickets nail on the tree trunks white leaves as irregular as the shadows of the night below. Gusts of gray wind agitate trees and uneasiness. Durito climbs up into my beard. The sneeze he provokes makes the armed knight tumble to the ground. Durito sits up with some difficulty. To the already imposing armor that is his body, Durito added half a *cololté* shell (which is a species of wild hazelnut found in La Lacandona) on his head and holds the top of a bottle of medicine like a shield. Excalibur is sheathed and a lance (that looks suspiciously like a straightened paper clip) completes his attire.

"Now what?" I ask as I try, in vain, to help Durito with my finger.

Durito rearranges his body, I mean, his armor. He unsheathes Excalibur, clears his throat a couple of times, and says in a presumptuous voice,

"Dawn, my battered squire! This is exactly the hour when night arranges its vestments to leave and day sharpens its thorny Apollo's mane to appear to the world! It is the hour when knights-errant ride off seeking adventures that elevate their prestige in the absent gaze of the lady that prevents them, even for an instant, from closing their eyes to seek oblivion or rest!"

I yawn and let my eyelids bring me oblivion or rest. Durito becomes irritated and raises his voice:

"We must go out to despoil maidens, take advantage of widows, come to the aid of bandits and incarcerate the penniless!"

¹ Mexico's Distrito Federal (Federal District), its seat of government, has some of the worst air pollution in the world. The terms D.F. and Mexico City are used interchangeably, and it is also referred to as the "*Ciudad de Palacios*" ("City of Palaces").

“That menu sounds like a government program,” I tell him with my eyes still closed.

Durito appears to have no intention of leaving without waking me fully:

“Wake up, scoundrel! I remind you of your duty to follow your Master wherever misfortunes or adventures may take him!”

I finally open my eyes and stare at him. Durito looks more like a broken-down army tank than a knight-errant.

To clear up my doubt I ask him, “And who are you supposed to be?”

“I am a knight-errant: not one of those whose names are never noted by Fame, to render them eternal in her memory, but rather one of those who, despite and in defiance of that same envy, and in the face of who knows how many Persian Magi, Indian Brahmans, or Ethiopian Gymnosophists, has carried his name straight into the temple of immortality, to serve as a model and example for all time to come, whereby knights-errant will see footsteps they have to walk in, if they long to attain the summit and highest honors that war and weaponry can bestow,” Durito answers, assuming his most (according to him) gallant pose.

“It sounds to me . . . it sounds like . . . like . . .” I begin to say but Durito interrupts me:

“Silence, foolish plebeian! Thou wouldst want to disparage me by saying that I plagiarize my speeches from *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quijote of La Mancha*. And certainly, since we are on this subject, I should tell you Sir, that you are wasting space in your epistles. That nonsense of footnotes! If you continue on that course you’ll end up like Galio, citing six or seven authors in one paragraph in order to cover cynicism with erudition.”³

I feel profoundly wounded by comments so close to home and I change the subject.

“That on your head . . . it looks like a *cololté* shell.”

“It is a helmet, ignoramus,” Durito says.

“Helmet? It looks like a shell with holes,” I insist.

“*Cololté*. Helmet. Halo. That’s the order, Sancho,” Durito says as he arranges his helmet.⁴

“Sancho?” I stutter-say-ask-protest.

“Well, stop this nonsense and prepare to leave because many are the injustices that my indefatigable sword must remedy, and its blade is now impatient to test the necks of independent unions.” As he says this, Durito brandishes his sword like the regent of a capital city.

2 Footnote by Marcos: “Book One: Chapter XLVII—all about Don Quijote de La Mancha’s strange enchantment, along with other celebrated events.” See Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, 324.

3 Galio is the protagonist of a novel that takes place during the “dirty war” carried out against guerrilla forces by the Mexican government during the 1970s. See Hector Aguilar Camín, *La Guerra de Galio* (México D.F.: Cal y Arena, 1991).

4 Sancho refers to Sancho Panza, Don Quijote’s squire and companion.

"I think you've read too many papers recently. Be careful, or they'll have you committing suicide," I tell Durito while I try to delay as long as possible the moment I get up. Durito, for a moment, abandons his 16th-century language and explains, proudly, that he has secured a mount. Durito says it is as swift as lightning in August, silent as the wind in March, docile as the rain in September, and I don't remember what other marvels, but there was one for each month of the year. I appear incredulous, so Durito announces solemnly that he will do me the honor of showing me his mount. I agree, thinking that this way I can sleep a little.

Durito leaves and is so long in returning that, in fact, I fall asleep . . .

A voice awakens me, "Here I am!" It is Durito and he is mounted on the logical reason for his delay: a little turtle! At a pace that Durito was bent on calling an "elegant trot" and that to me looked more like a very prudent and drawn-out one, the turtle stopped in front of me. Mounted on his turtle (they call it "*pegasus*" in Tzeltal), Durito turns to look at me and asks, "So how do I look?"

I stare at him and maintain a respectful silence before this knight-errant that who knows what reasons brought to the solitude of La Lacandona. His appearance is "peculiar."

Durito baptized his turtle, excuse me, his horse with a name that seems more a delirium: *Pegasus*. So that there is no doubt, Durito has written on the shell of the turtle, with large and decisive letters, "*PEGASUS. Copyrights Reserved,*" and below that, "*Please fasten your seat belts.*" I just can't resist the temptation of making a comparison with the economic recuperation program when Durito turns his mount so I can see his other side. Pegasus takes his time, so that what Durito announced as a "vertiginous spin of his horse," is actually a slow turn. A movement that the turtle makes so carefully that anyone would say that he doesn't want to get dizzy. After a few minutes, I can read on Pegasus' left flank "*Smokers' Section,*" "*Union Charros not allowed.*"⁵ "*Free advertising space.*" "*For information call Durito's Publishing.*" I believe, however, that there isn't much free space available because the ad covers all the left and rear flank of Pegasus.

After praising the ultra-mini-micro entrepreneurial vision of Durito, the only way to survive the wreckage of neoliberalism and NAFTA, I ask him, "So where does thy future lead thee, my lord?"

"Don't be a clown. That language only belongs to noblemen and lords and not to vagabonds and plebeians who, were it not for my infinite compassion, would continue in their hollow lives and would never be able even to dream about knowing the secrets and marvels of knight-errantry," responds Durito while trying to restrain Pegasus, who for some strange reason seems impatient to leave.

It seems to me that, for it being two in the morning, I've already received enough scolding, so I tell Durito, "Wherever you go, you'll go alone. I don't plan to leave tonight. Yesterday Camilo found tiger tracks and he says it must still be close by."

5 The use of *charro* conveys both the national image of the middle-class, landed horseman popularized after the Mexican Revolution, and the popular moniker for bureaucrats.

I believe I've found a vulnerable flank of our brave knight, because his voice trembles when he asks, "Ti . . . ti . . . tiger?" And he adds, after swallowing saliva with audible difficulty, "And what do these tigers eat?"

"Everything. Guerrillas, soldiers, beetles . . . and turtles!" This last part I say observing the probable reaction from Pegasus. The little turtle must have really believed it is a horse, because it did not seem to be alarmed. Actually, I thought I heard a soft whinny.

"Bah! You say so just to frighten me, but you should know that this armed knight has defeated giants disguised as windmills that in turn disguised themselves as armed helicopters. He has conquered the most impregnable kingdoms, he has subdued the resistance of the most demure princesses, he has . . ."

I interrupt Durito. I know that he can take up pages and pages talking and then I'm the one who gets criticized by the editors, especially when the communiqués arrive so late at night.

"Fine, fine. But tell me, where are you going?"

"To Mexico City!" Durito says, brandishing his sword. It seems the trip's destination surprises Pegasus, because he gives sort of a start, which for a turtle is like a discreet sigh.

"Mexico City?" I ask incredulously.

"Sure! Do you think I would be deterred just because Comcopa didn't let you all go?"⁶

I wanted to warn Durito not to speak ill of Comcopa because the legislators are so sensitive and then they get mad during the negotiations, but Durito continued: "You should know I am a knight-errant, but more Mexican than the failure of the neoliberal economy. Therefore, I have the right to go to the so-called 'City of Palaces.' What do they want palaces for in Mexico City if not so that a knight-errant like myself, the most famous, the most gallant, the most respected by men, loved by women, and admired by children, should honor them by stepping foot inside?"

"It will be with your many legs—I remind you that besides being a knight-errant and a Mexican you are also a beetle," I correct him.

"Regardless of my foot or legs, a palace without knights-errant stopping by is like a child without a present on April 30th,⁷ like a pipe without tobacco, like a book without words, like a song without music, like a knight-errant without a squire," and arriving at this last point Durito looks at me fixedly and asks: "Are you sure you don't want to follow me on this intriguing adventure?"

"It depends," I say, pretending to be very interested, and adding, "It depends what you mean by 'intriguing adventure.'"

"It means I'm going to the May Day parade," Durito says as if he were saying, "I'm going to the corner for some cigarettes."

"To the May Day parade! But what if there's not going to be a parade?! Fidel Velázquez, who has always worried about workers' pocketbooks, said there was no

6 COMCOPA, or COCOPA.

7 This day is celebrated in Mexico as the official "Day of the Child."

money for the parade.⁸ Some rumor-mongers insinuated that he is afraid that the workers will get out of control and, instead of being grateful to the supreme one, will only curse him with those words that cartoonists dislike. But it's a lie, the Labor Secretary quickly said it was not out of fear, that it was just a 'veery respectable' decision from the labor sector, and . . ."

"Whoa, whoa, stop your parade float! I'm going to the May Day parade because I am going to challenge this Fidel Velázquez to a duel. He is, as everyone knows, a fierce ogre who oppresses poor people. I will challenge him to fight in the Azteca stadium to see if that way the attendance will improve, because ever since they fired Beenhaker (don't criticize me if it's misspelled, not even the directors of the Américas team can spell it, and they're the ones who wrote his checks), no one goes to the games anymore."⁹ Durito is silent for a moment and looks pensively at *Pegasus*, who must have gone to sleep, because it has been a while since he moved. Suddenly Durito asks me, "Do you think Fidel Velázquez has a horse?"

I hesitate a bit. "Well, he's a *charro* so it's very likely that he has a horse."

"Magnificent," says Durito, and digs his spurs into *Pegasus*.

Pegasus may think he's a horse, but his body is still that of a turtle and he has the hard shell to prove it, so he doesn't even notice Durito's cowboy exhortations to get him going. After struggling a bit, Durito discovers that by hitting him on his nose with the paperclip, excuse me, the lance, he can make *Pegasus* stretch out into a full gallop. A "full gallop" for this horse-turtle is about 10 centimeters per hour, so one can see that it will take Durito a long time to reach D.F.

"At that rate, you will arrive when Fidel Velázquez is dead," I tell Durito as a parting thought.¹⁰

I should never have said it. Durito pulled back the reins and reared his horse like when Pancho Villa took Torreon. Well, it's a good literary image.¹¹ In reality what *Pegasus* did was to stop, which, at his rate was almost imperceptible. In contrast to *Pegasus'* calm, Durito is furious when he tells me:

"Your problem is the same as what happened to the advisors of the labor movement in the last decades! They recommended patience to the worker, and they sat down to wait for the *charro* to fall off his mount, and did nothing to knock him down."

"Well, not all of them sat down to wait. Some have struggled, and hard, to create a truly independent labor movement."

"Those are the ones I'm going to see. I'm going to join them so I can show all of them that we workers have dignity too," Durito says, who I recall once told me that

8 Fidel Velázquez dominated labor relations for 60 years, co-founding the Mexican Workers Confederation, or CTM (*Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos*) in 1936.

9 Leo Beenhaker managed the Américas soccer team from Mexico City.

10 Velázquez, popularly known as "the mummy" for his advanced age and tenure, was 95 at the time of this communiqué. He died in 1997.

11 The image of General Francisco Villa triumphantly entering the city of Torreon, Coahuila on April 3, 1914, marks a critical turning point in the Revolution, and is celebrated in photos and paintings.

he was a miner in the state of Hidalgo and an oil worker in Tabasco.

Durito leaves. He takes a few hours to disappear behind the bush that's a few meters from my plastic roof. I get up and notice that my right boot is loose. I shine my flashlight on it and discover that ... the lace is missing! And it's then that I realize why Pegasus' reins looked familiar. Now I'll have to wait until Durito returns from Mexico. I look for a reed to tie my boot and I think that I forgot to recommend to Durito to visit that restaurant with the tiles.¹² I lie down again. It's almost dawn ...

Above, the sky stretches out, and with reddish-blue eyes, contemplates, amazed that Mexico is still there, where it was yesterday. I light my pipe, I watch the last spirals of night detach themselves from the trees, and I tell myself that the struggle is very long and it is worth it ...

P.S. that with the face of a full moon looks toward the jungle and wonders, who is this man that rides over a squalid shadow? Why does he not seek relief? Why does he endure new pain? Why so many journeys while standing still? Who is he? Where is he going? Why does he say goodbye with such a noisy silence?

P.S. to a CND that can't decide whether to fight against the party-state system or against itself.

I read somewhere that while the supreme government beats on both sides, the CND beats on itself. About that and other things, a few lines:

As the poet with the graying mustache who hides behind the piano writes,

Mexico is a joyful flower
That never sought a vase
A wild boar that brags
About its youth
A javelin at the heart of justice
The "x" camouflaged as a "j"

And so Manuel may be right when he says that the meetings of the "Collective Centers of Civilian Support" are like meetings of "Alcoholics Anonymous" or "Weight Watchers." Maybe there is more to learn from these meetings than from party assemblies.

After all, the CND was born with the idea of unity, not to enter into the market of party clientelism. A plan that includes the greatest possible number and quality of civic will was and is necessary. The CND had that plan. It shouldn't be the political arm of the Ee-Ze, or a new party, or a new white elephant of the inconsistent Mexican left. It must be the space where the imaginations and proposals for democratic change meet. And about these imaginations and proposals, the freshest, the most audacious, come from civil society, not from political society, that is, not from political organizations. Its

12 The Sanborns restaurant, located near the Zócalo, was the site of the famous meeting between Zapata and Villa.

flag is national, that's what it is, the one that rises above parties and armies. From that space of encounter can come proposals to impose, with imagination, on the government, on the parties, on the Zapatista army, and on itself. That ship does not want to arrive at the port of power. In that sense, it does not comply with the pragmatic and cynical premises of Galio-Machiavelli, but it does want to arrive at the port of a country with no return to the shadows, a country with democracy, liberty, and justice. Is there dead weight? Throw them overboard! Will only a few remain aboard? Imagination will replace quantity with quality! Civil society has much to learn from itself, and very little to learn from political society (with its full spectrum of colors, flavors, and cynicisms). It is not a space for those against the party, but it could be for those without a party. This civil society will manage, in the midst of the threats of the dirty war (although there isn't, I believe, a war that can be called clean), to make the Angel of Independence rappel off its column and begin to chat with Juárez, Columbus, and old grandfather Cuauhtémoc, with the kind Diana hunting stars, and a stray palm tree drunk with smog.¹³ This civil society will turn its non-proposals into realities; civil dialogues in the middle of tanks, machine guns and cannons; campaigns of humanitarian aid, in the middle of a profound crisis and a generalized inflation, meant to relieve its most vulnerable and impoverished flank, the indigenous. If the CND is not an ample space for this and other initiatives, the shapeless but effective irreverence of civil society will escape from that straitjacket. And then? Correct, it will build its own meeting spaces. The CND will become another acronym, added to the inefficiency of existing acronyms. There's still a lot to learn. This country has a lot to learn from itself.

P.S. To Whom It May Concern in the supreme government:

There is a type of lens cut so that it has many surfaces, like a multifaceted prism. This lens is mounted on a small wooden viewfinder, like an eyepiece. Looking through this lens, the light becomes many. When it is turned or moved, it offers many new configurations. Is it the same light broken into many lights? Are there many lights imprisoned in the eyepiece? Is it just confirmation that there is no singularity even in the most apparent unity? Is it only one light or many that one must be able to distinguish, recognize, and appreciate? And, finally, thinking about the tiny eyepiece, is it a light with many *marcos* [frames] or a single *marco* [frame] for many lights?

Vale, once again. *Salud*, and only by arriving in hell will we know the answer.

El Sub with a red carnation in his lapel, playing at being a crystal and a mirror.

¹³ These refer to landmark statues on Reforma Boulevard in Mexico City: Benito Juárez (first Mexican President of the 19th century); Cuauhtémoc (the last *Tlatoani*, emperor of the Aztec Empire); Diana is the Roman goddess of the hunt and the moon, and sister to the sun god Apollo. The Angel of Independence was built to commemorate 100 years of Mexican independence and has become a symbol of Mexico City.

Durito's May Day Postcard

After traveling to Mexico City to find Fidel Velázquez, Durito participated, with hundreds of thousands of workers, in the May Day protests that went on despite government opposition. While the dominant theme of the protests was clearly opposition to the neoliberal austerity programs put in place in the wake of the Peso Crisis and the \$50 billion investor bailout engineered by the International Monetary Fund, President Bill Clinton, and President Ernesto Zedillo, there was also tremendous support expressed for the Zapatistas in their struggle with the government. This communiqué recounts a postcard Durito sent back from Mexico City telling of the demonstrations.

To the national weekly *Proceso*
To the national newspaper *El Financiero*
To the national newspaper *La Jornada*
To the local newspaper of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, *Tiempo*
May 5, 1995

Sirs:

Here go letters for the indicated recipients. I would appreciate your addition of some special stamps and elegant envelopes. Today's celebration promises to be bloody.¹ The absence of Durito and the continuing heavy rain promise skirmishes instead of a formal battle. The problem is getting worse because no one wants to be the French. It is obvious that this is another *sexenio*.²

Vale. Salud, and congratulations for May 10th to all those who still have a mother.³

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

P.S. that gives an account of Durito's travels and advice.

Durito has sent me a postcard. It contains a photo of him, with Pegasus on his left and the Monument of the Revolution on his right. The caption reads, "Which is slower? The left or the right?" Durito writes, in the postcard, that he failed to find Fidel Velázquez, but that he took part in the May Day march. He

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- 1 The Mexican defeat of the French at the Battle of Puebla in 1862 is celebrated on May 5th.
- 2 The *sexenio* is the six-year term of office of the Mexican Presidency.
- 3 Mother's Day is celebrated in Mexico on May 10th.

recounts the following: that when he passed in front of the American Embassy he cried out, “Dodgers Sí, Yankees No!” (Durito didn’t know that Valenzuela is now with the San Diego Padres);⁴ that he doesn’t remember when he entered the Zócalo or when he left;⁵ that a man, after observing him for a long time, approached him and said, “Excuse me, I don’t mean to offend, but I cannot resist the temptation to say that you look remarkably like a scarab”; and that there were a whole lot of people there. “EVERYBODY was there,” said Durito, and added, with his eternal tendency to state the obvious, “The only thing missing was a revolution.”

P.S. that explains the delay in consultations within Zapatista communities.

We are confused with respect to the government proposal: we are not sure what is meant by the declaration of Gurría, this agent of foreign sales, who brags about his duties as Secretary of Foreign Relations, while he demands the regrouping of Zapatista “insurgents.” Insofar as he thinks that the conflict in Chiapas is a “war of ink,” does he refer only to those Zapatistas who know how to read and write?⁶ If this is the case, then the three locations where they want the Zapatistas to concentrate are far too many and it will be much cheaper for the government to care only for the literate.⁷ If you don’t believe me, ask the ever-pleasing Del Valle, who laughs at the way our representatives speak Spanish.⁸

* * *

4 Fernando Valenzuela, a famous baseball player from Mexico, played for the Los Angeles Dodgers, sparking an enthusiasm among many Mexican fans known as “Fernandomania.”

5 The Zócalo is the large plaza facing the Presidential Palace in Mexico City.

6 Speaking to 150 businessmen at the World Trade Center in New York, José Angel Gurría said, “The shooting lasted ten days, and ever since the war has been a war of ink, of the written word and a war on the Internet.” See, “Chiapas es Guerra de Tinta e Internet,” *La Reforma*, April 26, 1995.

7 The government proposal made at the end of the first new round of talks on April 23, 1995 included a demand that all Zapatista forces be concentrated in three locations. In return, the government offered to provide food, housing, healthcare and a partial pullback of its troops. The EZLN returned from their communities to the second round of talks with a firm rejection of the proposal. Instead, they demanded that the Mexican government withdraw its troops to where they had been before the February 1995 offensive.

8 José Del Valle was one of the Mexican government representatives at the negotiations. During the negotiations, he and government representatives were often insulting and disdainful of their indigenous counterparts. See Marcos’ letter to the press published in *La Jornada* on February 10, 1996, and included in this volume as “The Riddle.” See also “The Story of the Hot Foot and the Cold Foot.”