

CHIAPAS:

MAYA IDENTITY AND THE ZAPATISTA UPRISING

"In Chiapas, the owners of the fincas treat the Indians worse than they treat their animals. Chiapas is one great finca in which we Indians are less important than the cows. Testimony of a Maya representative to the National congress in 1992.

by Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor

The vast majority of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) fighters are Indigenous Maya Tojolabal, Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Chole peoples in addition to a smaller number of mestizos and other ethnic groups. Their demands are diverse, oscillating between those raised by the revolutionary class-oriented movements of Central America, classic Mexican campesino (peasant) demands, and the claims being made by the Indigenous movement. The EZLN has also incorporated into its positions a wide range of demands relating to the urban movement's struggles, the political parties, and to the demands for democracy voiced by Mexican society in general.

Is this an Indigenous rebellion or an Indigenous uprising with campesino demands? Is this the beginning of a Mexican civil war for national democracy or is it a local struggle to change the medieval structures of Chiapas? Is this the last chapter of the Central American class-based revolutions or is it the first chapter

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of the modern Indigenous "Indianist" revolutions? The recent history of Chiapas can help explain the apparently exclusive nature of these questions.

The Zapatista rebellion is embedded in the historic and geographic specificities of Chiapas. The state can be divided into four distinct regions: the first, incorporates the densely populated highlands and the newly colonized border zone; the central region which has only been populated by mestizos since the 19th Century; the coastal region colonized in this Century by mestizo immigrants; and the Soconusco region with its old colonial settlements. These areas have few relations with each other. They are sustained by different economic activities, partially due to the absence, until the 1970's, of roads and communication. The conflict developed in the highland and border area. The highlands are the ancestral territory of the rebellion's principal actors, the: Maya Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal and Chole peoples. The border region, which includes the Lacandon rainforest, has received waves of migrant Indians from the highlands over the last 30 years. It now constitutes the regional and social base of the Zapatista army.



Chiapas and Guatemala: shared identities

The original Maya territory was fragmented during the formation of the colonial nations, into five Mexican states--Chiapas, Tabasco, Yucatan, Quintana Roo, and Campeche--in addition to Guatemala and Belize. During the colonial period, Chiapas belonged to Spain's Guatemalan Captaincy General. Its social, economic, cultural, and political structures were defined in this period, and have persisted in contemporary Chiapas without revolutionary changes. Chiapas was annexed by the Mexican Republic in 1824 as the result of a plebiscite in which only ladinos (those of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry) --being the only citizens who could



Grassroots and human rights organizations condemned the region's heavy militarization following the uprising. Indigenous couple here talk with soldiers at a hastily assembled barricade.

read and write--voted. Despite annexation to Mexico, Chiapas continued to be integrated with Guatemala. Even today, its geography, its language, even its commerce fall within the limits of Guatemala. In-migration of Guatemalans looking for work has also been common. Until the 1970's, there was no direct road connecting Chiapas to the northern part of Mexico. Thus, the state capital of Tuxtla Gutiérrez was located 1,000 km by road from Mexico City.

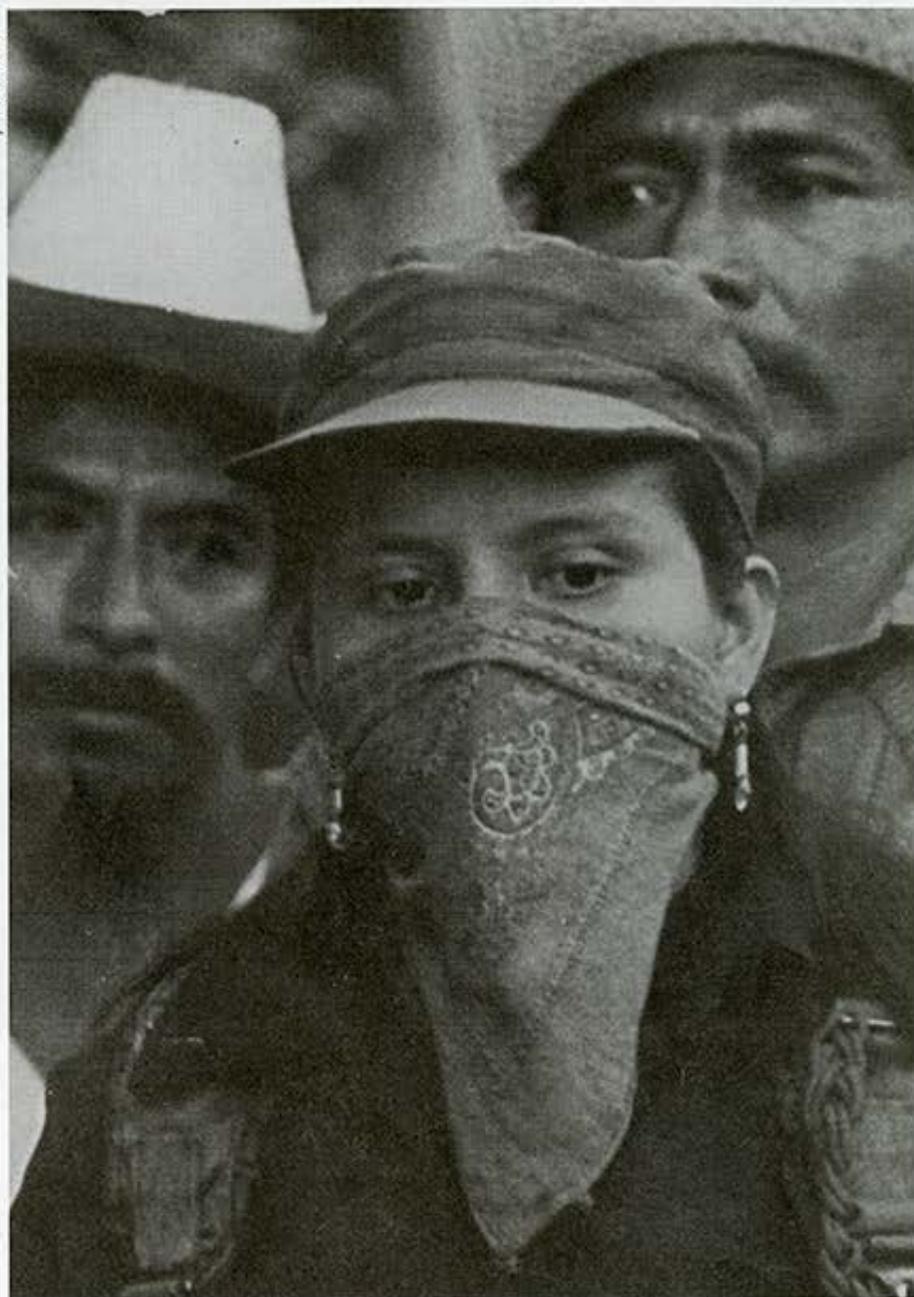
An important aspect of highland Chiapan society which clearly identifies it with Guatemalan society is that of identity. Indians were given a key role in the construction of the Mexican state, but only as dead Indians. Living Indians in contrast were denied. In

this way, a national model was constructed based on the notion of a glorious Indian past and a homogeneous, that is, mestizo, (mixed ancestry) present. Guatemalan ideology differs substantially. There, people who are biologically mestizo assume themselves descendants of the criollos referring to themselves as ladinos and as the people of reason. In opposition obviously are those lacking reason, the Indians. Chiapas in contrast to the rest of Mexico echoes the Guatemalan notion of identity. The ladinos negate racial mixing entirely and have organized society according to racial divisions; thereby guaranteeing racial discrimination and turning the devaluing of Indigenous people into a daily act.

Not the first indigenous uprising

Indian people have paid an extremely high price to maintain their identity. Indian rebellions, though nearly always frustrated, have been as much a constant of Chiapas' history as has the exploitation and oppression which followed the conquest. In 1532, the Maya rose against the Spanish. Following their defeat many heroically threw themselves from a cliff known as Cañon del Sumidero. In 1712, following several local uprisings, the Indigenous people throughout the highlands rebelled again; this time grouped around an apparition of the Virgin Mary. They declared the Indigenous headquarters of Cancuc as their capital and rejected Ciudad Real (now San Cristobal de las Casas), along with its civil and

photo: SAIIC



Many Zapatista Commanders and fighters, including Comandante Ana Maria, are women.

ecclesiastic authorities. Finally in 1714, a powerful army from Guatemala annihilated the rebels who had taken refuge in Ocosingo. The tremendous misery which resulted from this defeat, followed by loss of lands and frequent famines led to further rebellions in 1864 and 1867 by Tzotziles attempting to reclaim their sovereignty--an intent which was again repressed. Since then, the state's criollos and ladinos have perfected their control over the Indigenous population in order

to ensure practically free labor for their plantations.

A state the revolution passed by

Labor relations are determined by ethnic oppression maintained by politicians and ladino plantation owners.

During Mexico's first period of Liberal reforms in the 19th century, landholding families headed the counter-reform. New privatization laws and colonization of Maya territories had caused

several Indigenous revolts. The federal government responded in 1849 with a law outlawing forced and uncompensated labor. This law ended the semi-feudal custom of debt peonage, under which an indigenous or campesina family occupies a portion of land in a finca in exchange for unpaid work; a situation which converted them into the landlord's property and made securing their own land impossible. This legislation provoked an armed uprising led by the landlords, who succeeded in overturning the law two years later. Debt peonage was progressively eliminated in the rest of Mexico following the revolution of 1910. In Chiapas, however, several hundred Indigenous people continue, even today, to work as indebted peons on the large plantations.

Just as the counter-reform gripped Chiapas in the 19th century, the state's landlords also won the 20th century's counter-revolution. In 1910, Mexico was convulsed with the first social revolution of the 20th century, its changes weren't felt in Chiapas. One of the first actions of the revolutionary government was to begin agrarian reforms that responded to the expectations of the millions of campesinos who had participated in the revolution. President Venustiano Carranza sent his officials to the republic's different states in order to implement this reform. In 1914, General Jesus Agustin Castro arrived in Chiapas as governor and initiated land distribution and efforts at protecting worker's rights. The land owners immediately rose in arms declaring themselves against Venustiano Carranza. Their rebellion coincided with the revolts in the country's Northern and Central regions led by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. History's paradox is that the Chiapan landowners declared themselves Villistas and Zapatistas, in order to ally with these armies. Thus, the first Zapatistas in Chiapas were counter-revolutionaries.

The counter-revolutionaries' threatened secession from the Union, and the federal government was forced to negotiate. At this time, they conceded that

Chiapas would always be governed by members of the Familia Chiapaneca--as the local criollos were known--and also that privately held land would not be expropriated. Since then, the Chiapan elite have invoked the specter of secession and the defense of state sovereignty to avoid intervention by the national government. The cost has been too high. The revolution's institutions which are ubiquitous in the rest of Mexico, never arrived in Chiapas. Thus the continuity of Chiapas' similarity to Guatemala remained unbroken. Likewise, the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) which has ruled Mexico since the revolution only recently installed itself in Chiapas. Its peasant and worker organizations which have coopted social movements in the rest of Mexico only arrived in Chiapas in the 1970's, and still have little presence.

The Lacandon rainforest: cradle of rebellion

Due to its regressive agrarian policy most of the state's arable land was concentrated in a few hands by 1940. According to population censuses, more than half was owned by 2.6% of the population. Just nine landlords accounted for 630,532 hectares. In contrast the average size of Indigenous and campesino farms was under two hectares. At the same time, a significant proportion of the state corresponded to "National Lands", that is forest areas susceptible to colonization. Population growth and the exhaustion of the ancestral Indigenous territories, government support for forest colonization, the displacement resulting from construction of hydroelectric dams, the advent of oil exploitation, soil deterioration, political and religious persecution and violence between 1960 and 1980 led to accelerated colonization of the Lacandon. The population grew from 5,000 to 300,000 inhabitants in those years. Thousands of Indigenous families from the highlands needing a piece of land to work took refuge in the forest, principally in the region of Las Cañadas. This region how-

ever is characterized by steep slopes and extremely poor soils underlain by calcareous rock. These soils retain water poorly; making agriculture very difficult. The region's physical harshness further sharpened social discontent.

The Indigenous colonists adapted to life in the forest only after profound cultural, political and ideological changes. They left parents and grandparents behind and remodeled their identity around the central desire to obtain land. In order to survive new and difficult conditions and the landowners unleashing violence, the colonists formed political or productive organizations.

These strengthened their nascent campesino identity, substituting for their communal (Indian) identity. The rainforest's new colonists and their young descendants are the protagonists of the conflict in Chiapas. The four municipal centers taken by the Zapatistas: San Cristobal, Las Margaritas, Ocosingo and Altamirano were all points of departure from the jungle, specifically from Las Cañadas.

The uprising's detonators

Chiapas' economic structures are archaic: plantations for export of coffee, cardamom, extensive livestock grazing and logging--without value added processing. According to official statistics, Chiapas holds the unenviable position of being Mexico's poorest state. Ninety-four of its 111 municipalities are considered highly marginal. The paradox is that Chiapas is also a rich state. In the last 10 years, it has held the third and fourth place respectively in the production of gas and

oil. Nonetheless, the majority of communities lack electricity as well as any of the other benefits yielded by their resources

Chiapas has the second highest proportion of indigenous inhabitants (28%) of all the Mexican states, three quarters of whom live in dispersed rural settlements. It also has the highest infant mortality and illiteracy rates, percentage of citizens with incomes less than two minimum salaries (about \$250), and outstanding petitions for land. Just under

half of the state's families live in houses with dirt floors, a statistic closely related to children's disease rates. A study prepared by the insti-

tute for European-Latin American Studies reported the following: "Chiapas has the lowest levels of electricity in the country (66.7%). Only 58% of the houses have running water when the national average is 79%...The state's population is only 4% of the nation, but constitutes 25% of all the disputes between campesinos and landlords in the country, disputes which often are violent."¹

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Maya Groups in Mexico



In a good will gesture, the EZLN inaugurated peace talks by releasing ex-governor Absalon Castellanos, held since the uprising's second day. Castellanos and his family own a significant portion of Chiapas' land and wealth. The EZLN and Indigenous organizations demand his trial for crimes committed during his administration, a period widely seen as the state's most repressive in modern history.



photo: SAIC

Out of the total population of close to 2,000,000, about 1,130,000 are "economically active" that is, 55.4% of the population receives no income.

While Chiapas occupies first place in the country for social marginality, this is further accentuated in the conflict regions. Illiteracy for those over 15 years old in Chiapas is close to 30%, in the Indigenous municipalities it is nearly twice that. In Altamirano 51% of the population over 15 years old is illiterate, in Las Margaritas 48%, in Ocosingo 47% while in San Cristobal 24% and Comitán 23%. The Indigenous people living in this region are the most marginal of the marginal.

Land ownership and Article 27

The virtual lack of an agrarian reform in Chiapas, as explained before, is directly related to the socio-economic and political problems are at the root of the January first explosion. The land distribution which occurred was realized principally on National Lands, and resulted from the struggles of the Indigenous people and campesinos without land. Rather than resolve petitions for granting ejidos or restitution of communal lands, the government has responded to demands for land by promoting colonization of near wastelands.

There is no consensus on the current quantities within each type of land ownership in the state. Some investigations

conclude that lands are totally distributed and that there are no large landholdings, others provide contrary opinions. According to leaders of the opposition, Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the last census showed that 2.8% of the estates in the state have more than 1,000 hectares each; while 40.75% have less than 10 hectares each. According to this source, five large properties concentrate 36,000 hectares. Thirty percent of the nation's petitions for land are concentrated in Chiapas, totaling approximately 134,000 petitioners. These petitioners saw their hopes for receiving land dashed with reform of article 27 of the constitution in January of 1992.

In addition to land, productive resources are also concentrated. The problem of inequality corresponds not only to the concentration of property but also to a discriminatory system which sharpens the exclusion and oppression of Indigenous people and reproduces exploitation.

The 1970's: explosion of campesino organizations

Struggle for land in Chiapas has always been a radical process subject to violence from landlords. The federal government's general agrarian reform policy emphasized the ejido form of tenure (individual and sub-divided) in detriment to traditional communal tenure.

Indigenous petitioners for land were given no choice but to opt for the ejido form of ownership. In this way, Indigenous people participating in the struggle for land assumed a campesinista consciousness through which they demanded land to work rather than the autonomous territories which were stolen during the European invasion. This campesino-class consciousness has homogenized the struggle of the Indigenous people of Chiapas.

The figure of Emiliano Zapata has been continuously invoked to support land struggles, whereas the indigenous struggles for recovery of Indian government were forgotten with the oral history of the traditional Indian communities.

An organizational landmark

In October of 1974, the state's first Indigenous Encounter was hosted by Bishop Samuel Ruiz. This event marked the beginning of the campesino and Indigenous mobilizations in the region. At this event Indigenous people reflected on their common problems and began to organize. This process was accelerated with the arrival in these years of several political organizations with different ideological tendencies.

One of the first to arrive was the Central of Independent Agricultural Workers and Campesinos (CIOAC), a national campesino organization affili-

ated with the communist party and inspired by the program of Emiliano Zapata. Its members established themselves in Indigenous communities and worked for land reform and to organize agricultural day-laborers attached through systems of peonage to the fincas.

A second important movements in the country's agrarian struggle since 1979 was the National Coordination Plan de Ayala (CNPA). Its profoundly agrarianist and anti-partisan program was also derived from the program of Emiliano Zapata. Its most important expression in Chiapas has been the Emiliano Zapata Campesino Organization (OCEZ). Both of the above organizations suffered from brutal repression carried out by local death squads and security forces in the 1970's and 1980's.

Also during these years, young activists, mostly economics students and adherents to Maoist philosophy arrived from the country's northern region becoming known as Los Norteños. They had both resources and enthusiasm. They learned Indigenous languages and organized. In contrast to CIOAC and OCEZ, this group did not emphasize land struggles, but rather the formation of ejido unions (cooperatives) to enhance productive activities. Currently, many of these ex-activists hold high offices in Salinas de Gortari's government.

A significant number of the members of these various organizations have presumably joined the ranks of the EZLN.

Campesinista and Indianist organizations

The formation of Indigenous organizations that assume a humanitarian banner is a recent activity that has not been able to establish itself significantly in the consciousness of the Indigenous peoples. The Campesina and Zapatista tradition has until now subjugated Indianist efforts. Among the Indigenous organizations formed in the recent years, are the Organization of Indigenous Doctors and the Coordinator of Maya Organizations Struggling for Liberation (COLPUMALI)-

-member of the Independent Indian Peoples Front (FIPI). The majority of these organizations were formed by Indigenous activists that had experiences in the campesina struggle, but whom in a recent process of re-indianization (no more than 7 years old) have begun to base their claims and organization in their Indian identity. These claims still have little weight in Chiapas. First because it is a young movement, but also because it has not had the international economic support that other movements have received. Some members of these organizations also joined the ranks of the Zapatista army.

It is important to note as well, that even as the EZLN was nourished by the movements mentioned above, the great majority of the activists and organizations in the state decided not to actively participate in the armed uprising. Even so, they have noted on several occasions that they share the same struggle. After the uprising, these organizations formed themselves into the State Indigenous and Campesino Council of Chiapas (CEOIC), in an attempt to form a common front to defend the interests of the Indigenous organizations and campesinos in the context of the negotiations that were opened between the government and the EZLN.

There are several important differences between the programs of the Campesinista and Indianist organizations. The campesinista organizations demand: 1) land distribution and modification of article 27 to continue with the agrarian reform; 2) cheap and appropriate credit for agricultural production; 3) roads, health care, education, housing and other services; 4) support in the productive process, installation of agro-industry and 5) guarantees of individual human rights.

The Indianist organization's program, whose proposal is headed by FIPI in-

cludes in part: 1) modification of the relation between the State and the Indigenous peoples which implies constitutional recognition of their right to self-determination; 2) recognition of territorial rights of the Indigenous people of the country and of Chiapas and establishment of pluri-ethnic Indigenous regions where the different

Indigenous identities and mestizos would live under equal conditions; 3) modification of national laws to guarantee the participation of Indigenous representation in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government at the federal and state level.

The differences between the Campesinista Indigenous movement and the Indianist Indigenous movement are clear. The Zapatista demands arise from both these traditions which follow the campesinista line, but at the same time, identify in the Indianist demands possibilities for ending colonial oppression.

This most recent Indigenous uprising in Chiapas has given new air to the Indigenous movement in Mexico. A new feeling has flooded the millions of Indians of Mexico who have strengthened their struggle through processes of unification. Nevertheless, the most important thing is the hope that it has brought to the Indigenous movement worldwide. The sympathy which the EZLN provoked in the world shows that the Indigenous struggles have reason and justice on their side.

A report presented to the European Parliament on the topic of Chiapas by the Institute for European-Latin American Relations emphasized that "The conflict shows that the increasing aggressiveness of the Indigenous communities in Latin America will lead to armed conflicts, if the growing consciousness of Indians as subjects with rights, is not followed by increased governmental capacity to satisfy their necessities." ❧

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