

Chiapas *as seen from* Temuco:

Interview with Aucán Huilcaman Consejo de Todas Las Tierras in Chile.



In the City of Temuco in the heart of Mapuche ancestral territory, the Consejo de Todas las Tierras (All Lands Council) meets once a year. Their international Werken (messenger), Aucán Huilcaman is charged with making known the denunciations, agreements and projects from the Mapuche Tribunal. He is also responsible for relations with other Indigenous peoples of the continent.

He is 27 years old and in his fourth year of law school at the Autonomous University of Temuco, he was also a congressional candidate in last December's elections, but didn't achieve a seat in the House. In the following interview he spoke regarding the situation in Chiapas, of the Mapuche in Chile, and the continental Indian movement.

by Ximena Ortuzar*

How do the Mapuche evaluate what happened in Chiapas this past January?

-There are various points related to this action. Personally, and in general, I celebrate the Zapatista's courage, decisiveness and organizational capacity which permitted them to prepare their uprising without being detected by the Mexican intelligence apparatus. That is remarkable. In addition, the Mapuche support all Indigenous peoples' struggles in defense of their legitimate rights. I observe though, a huge split between the discourse and ideology of the continental Indigenous movement and what the Zapatistas are proposing. In one of their points, they demand, "More land for the Indigenous people." This is good, but insufficient. Even if they give more lands, these will continue to be just fragments of the larger landscape. The fundamental Indigenous problem in all of America is that of territory. When the state distributes parcels of land, they remain under its sovereignty. The central demand

should be territory, where Indigenous rights have clear legitimacy. You cannot attack the real problems of the Indigenous people of the continent if you do not approach this issue.

Land and Territory

What is the conceptual difference between land and territory?

-Land is an individual concept relating a person to a specific place-person-property, whereas the concept of territory is collective and refers to a group of people with a portion of collective land. For the Indigenous people, the concept of territory holds elements of identity, of culture of a form of organization. I can give you an example: with us, the Mapuche, many of the trees that surround us have names like the names of our children. And when the huinca --white person cuts the trees, clearing the native forest, we feel that our identity has been cut off. Territory is connected in a substantial

manner with being human, and with our own nature. Our conception is that the territory is a physical space where the Mapuche people should have control, planning power and autonomy to exercise free self-determination.

I understand that one of the Mapuche's principal struggles in these moments is precisely for territory.

-That's right. That has meant charges against us for "illicit association", and "failure before the law, morality and good customs" which affects 144 of us. We could go to jail, but this will not stop our decision to recover what belongs to us.

And you miss this conceptual element in the Zapatista proposal.

-From what I know, yes. I see also that they ask for Salinas de Gortari to resign. I believe that he could resign and that wouldn't solve the problem for Indigenous people in Mexico. In my opinion, this is a weakness in the proposal, because the basic question is



not of changing the president but of changing the nature of the State, in order to achieve transformation that restrains the State's absolute dominion over the Indigenous people which is exercised against their will. In the Zapatista proclamations I don't see a questioning of the structure of the State. Another point that seems curious to me is that the highest visible leader is a "sub-commander" ...When we meet in our Tribunal there is no president, or secretary or treasurer of the Mapuche community, rather we have a Lonko, Machi--original authorities. These positions bring together the institutional structure and the juridic concept of the community.

And you find this important...

-Definitely, yes. It is not a question of form. While you don't reinstate your own forms of organization as a weapon to oppose the forms of ideological domination that the State imposes, you are fighting with your oppressor's weapons and they are not ours by nature.

How would you explain this situation in the case of Chiapas?

-As a certain amount of mental colonization. No one can fail to recognize the effort, the courage and the decisiveness of the Zapatistas that rose up in Chiapas. But I reiterate that in my judgement the proposal that we know

has holes in the area of Indigenous rights. They propose the need for justice which is impossible while the rights of Indigenous people in Chiapas to decide their own future is not reinstated. And this happens by reinstating territory and changing the structure of the State. I also see that they



Aucan Huilcaman addressing the UN World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna during June, 1993

propose the need for an agrarian reform law which is a concept distorted from the essence of an indigenous community. In Chile there was an agrarian reform and we don't question the amount of lands that were returned to

the Indigenous people, but rather the form in which this was implemented. If we travel through the province of Arauco we encounter barely five Mapuche communities. The rest are villages close to cities. They applied colonial thinking. Historically, the Council of the Indies--which was an organization designed to organize the Indians according to the dominant concepts--it recognized the Indigenous people's right to organize in municipalities and gave them a structure for this. With the agrarian reform, the Mapuche were obligated to live in villas on lands awarded in a determined place, making this a population center that breaks with the concept of individual-land that represents a human collectivity. In this aspect, I see in the Zapatistas a conceptual weakness.

What do you attribute this to?

-I don't exactly know. I believe that the Indigenous peoples in Mexico have sufficient institutional structure and they should have employed this in Chiapas. I am certain that the Mapuche would never have a sub-commander in a similar situation. We could have a Toqui, an original authority, but never a copy, an assimilation. I want to clarify that I don't intend to take away from what the Zapatistas have done, but it's my duty to say that I detect a certain strange influence on the Indigenous people in these circumstances.

What is the basis for your statement?

-For the last six years, we have met periodically with Indigenous leaders of Mexico, I know all of them. The last time, I was in Oaxaca last October. They assume that they are ethnic groups and don't vindicate their existence as peoples or nations. Ideological domination has entered into their minds and language. In Mexico, the Indian walks in the streets like a dominated being, despite being part of the majority, biologically speaking. They are not conscious of who they are. This is

explained by the fact that Mexico's government has implemented the most policies of assimilation against Indigenous people. Already in 1942 in the government of Lazaro Cardenas it was said, "We have to Mexicanize the Indians, and not to Indianize Mexico." And they worked on the Indians with that purpose.

Maybe the roots of the problem lie in the Conquest...

-Without doubt, the Spanish crown had a strong influence on the Indigenous people that inhabited the territory that is now the State of Mexico. Today they are disarticulated, they cannot decipher their own writing, and this blocks their ability to reach, once again, their own scientific explanation of life.. The Indigenous trunk was cut and they are still in the process of reassembling themselves. While this process is incomplete, the consciousness, the commitment of being Indigenous will continue to fail, despite being the majority.

Self-understanding as a person

What does it mean to be committed to being an Indigenous person?

-It is not a specific commitment or political belief but rather a way of understanding yourself as a person. A good example of this is that in Mexico, there have been two Indian presidents: Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz who governed for many years. Nevertheless, this did not mean any advantage for the Indians of Mexico.

To be Indian in biological or racial terms doesn't mean anything if the kind of commitment I was speaking about doesn't exist.

In the meeting with Indigenous leaders of Mexico which you alluded to, did you raise these observations?

-All of them.

With what response?

-Our concepts are very well received, but there has been unevenness in the level of who deals with the subject that stops at the level of leaders. Furthermore, the communities of Mexico have been very controlled. If one visits an Indigenous community, you find that it has a plaza, it has its musical bands that is, everything is organized as the Council of the Indies would have it. The Romano-Spanish concept of organization is palpable in the community's structures, which seem more like those of a city. I'm speaking of an ideological concept, applied through external structures, and contradictions arise such that Indians end up being Mexicans.

And this doesn't occur with the Mapuches?

-I would say it occurs less. I will give you an example: we hear and we read about Emiliano Zapata. If we don't have prior knowledge we don't know that he was Indigenous, because as happens with Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz, despite being Indians, they have Spanish names. We have struggled to conserve our Mapuche names and we have accomplished that with very few exceptions. The great majority of the Mapuche conserve their original last names, and for us, that constitutes an important element of our identity. Meanwhile in Mexico many times, Indians only recognize themselves inside themselves--and many times, not even there. Here, our last name identifies us as Mapuches, and in consequence, not as Chileans.

Chiapas a Landmark

To finish the fourth annual session of the Mapuche Tribunal, Huilcamán gave a speech in Temuco. In finishing he said, "To the brothers in Chiapas, forward with the struggle for land and liberty."

Will Chiapas set an important precedent in the Indigenous struggle?

-Without doubt. But it's important not to let out of our sight that this precedent and its lessons are important for both parties: Indigenous peoples and States. An example of this is that the first constitutional and juridic recognitions of Indigenous people arose in Nicaragua during the Sandinista Revolution when the Indigenous people rebelled against the Sandinista government and began the armed struggle which was erroneously called counter-revolutionary. The government decided to recognize them, and it happened that other States took similar measures. These were re-accommodations, small legal rectifications... Legally functional for the States, but not for the Indigenous people...

Things change so that everything remains the same?

-Exactly. The State makes legal modifications in order to insure the maintenance of its institutional domination.

Is there a message you would like to convey?

-Indigenous movements are the ones which will give a new face to America in terms of justice, democracy, and liberty--which today are only a dream for us. Thus, its fundamental that every political and social movement in America takes into account this element which will define relations State-people and Indigenous nation. Because today, it is not Marxism that puts the State at risk, but the Indigenous-original organizations. The State knows this, and takes its precautions. Every social and or political organization that fights for human rights must know that the indigenous people should prevail and contribute to the construction of a true institutionality with our own character and based on our own particularities. 🐦

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