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The Fiesta of the Word: The Zapatista Uprising and Radical Democracy in Mexico

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The Fiesta of the Word

The Zapatista Uprising and Radical Democracy in Mexico

There was a great stone where all those who were born in the world were walking in the paths of the first gods. With all that tramping above it, the stone became very smooth, like a mirror. Against this mirror the first gods blew into the air the first three words. The mirror did not withdraw the same words that it received but, rather, returned three other times three different words. The gods spent their time this way, throwing the words at the mirror in order that more come out until they were bored. Then they had a great thought in their mind, and they made a path over another great rock and another great mirror was polished and they put it in front of the first mirror and this returned three times three different words that they blew out, with all the force they had, against the second mirror, and this returned to the first mirror, three times three the number of words that it received, and so they were throwing out more and more different words against the two mirrors. Thus it was that the true language was born. It was born from the mirrors. [*Expreso* 1994; author's translation]

The old man's narration, published in a communiqué from the Zapatistas in a Chiapas newspaper a year after the January 1, 1994, uprising, goes on to define the first three words. *Justice* means "not to punish, but to give back to each what he or she deserves, and that is what the mirror gives back." *Liberty* is "not that each one does what he or she wants, but to choose whatever road that the mirror wants in order to arrive at the true word." *Democracy* requires "not that all think the same, but that all thoughts or the majority of the thoughts seek and arrive at a good agreement."

In their redefinition of the modernist ideals of justice, liberty, and democracy, Mayas of the southernmost state of Chiapas are revising these concepts for a postmodern age. As they mobilize to assert their rights to land, political participation, and their distinctive cultures, they are transforming the basis of their ethnic identity from fragmented, ethnically distinct communi-

ties to pluricultural coexistence in regional and national arenas. While challenging their own subordination in Mexico, they are changing the political process to encompass a plurinational state.

Nation building has often been assumed to require the assimilation or even annihilation of marginalized cultures. The pluricultural base of Mexican society (like that of many other Latin American states with large indigenous populations) was seen as an obstacle to modernity. Latin American scholars such as Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1987) and Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantra (1984) have shown in their critique of the *indigenista* ideology that it only embraced indigenous cultures in order to induce them to give up their distinctive identities. This critique led Bonfil Batalla to recognize the importance of these reserves of cultural initiatives when he said, "The stigmatized and devalued cultures are in truth a vast reserve of alternative cultural resources whose value, denied until today, would be absurd to ignore" (1987:94). In a recent analysis of "our [Latin American] identity starting from pluralism in the base," Xavier Albo (1995) summarizes the efforts of the many small and ethnically diverse nations who are defining a unifying project for multiple, coexisting, autonomous nations that they call Abya-Yala. The name, which Albo tells us comes from the Cuna language of Panama and means "land in complete maturity," encompasses the possibility of such a national unity. Paradoxically, their skills of survival learned as a dominated group prepare them to be leaders in the postmodern world.

I shall try to show here the potential of these alternative cultural beliefs and practices as responses to global changes in the postmodern world. In their efforts to achieve radical democracy, contemporary Mayas are promoting a pluricultural approach to multiple nationalisms coexisting within states. I shall argue that in their search for peace with justice, and through their invention of new democratic forums in the three years since the January 1, 1994, uprising, Mayas are demonstrating that formerly marginalized enclaves of distinct cultural

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formations may be the best prepared to usher in a post-modern world of pluriethnic and pluricultural coexistence. Culturally distinct but structurally related revolts are occurring elsewhere in Mexico (Nugent 1988).

The Pluriethnic Roots of Rebellion

The central beliefs and values guiding the radical democratic movement of contemporary Mayas have roots in a preconquest pluriethnic society (Clark and Blake 1993). The art of incorporating new populations and cultural traits in an expanding network of ceremonial centers and peripheral settlements organically linked through the exchange of special products is amply demonstrated by archaeologists and ethnohistorians in the three thousand years of Maya expansion in the Chiapas area. Tolerance for a multiplicity of alternative cultural patterns within the same communities, with each tradition building on or discarding the features of their neighbors, was characteristic of Olmec civilization. Successive waves of Teotihuacáanos, Chiapanecos, and Toltecas exchanged their gods and products in territories where Maya hegemonic control operated until the Late Classic period (Lee 1994). Fragments of the beliefs and rituals which once defined the macro-Maya civilization are still discernible in contemporary villages.¹

This integrative process was broken by the Spanish invasion into southern New Spain in 1528. It was during the colonial period, not before, that indigenous people withdrew into corporate communities. These communities, created by the Spanish crown, fragmented preconquest pluriethnic regions and the extensive commercial and political interrelationships that had prevailed among Mayas and their predecessors for over two millennia. The fictive cultural autonomy of indigenous townships masked exploitative relationships with ladino- (nonindigenous-)dominated towns while allowing "Indians" to exercise distinctive cultural practices within their communities.² The cost of this unequal engagement outside of their communities was often alcoholism, internecine witch-hunts, abusive familial relations, and the expulsion of compatriots charged with violating custom.³ Yet the core of resistance and rebelliousness during the colonial and independence periods persisted in a spiritual world made up of Christian saints (who often masked preconquest powers) controlled by diviner/curers and officials who carried the cargo, or burden, of carrying out rituals in their honor. Carnival, Easter week, and the Day of the Cross—celebrated in accord with the Christian calendar—were especially dedicated to indigenous concerns (Bricker 1981; Hermite 1992). They were also, not coincidentally, days rebellions broke out, as in Chamula in 1867–69,

when the war between Indians and ladinos was waged. Although armed rebellions did not occur as frequently in Chiapas as in the central regions of Mexico, Mario Humberto Ruz (1994) shows the many incidents of cultural resistance to Spanish and ladino rule, and Friedrich Katz points out that the rebellions that occurred "tended to challenge the colonial system as a whole" (1988:88).

The indigenous peoples of Chiapas were not voluntary participants in the wars that swept through the countryside during the 1910 revolution, and revolutionary gains came slowly or never. Chiapas did not begin to make claims until the 1930s and was able to regain only a fraction of eligible holdings. The basis for local power changed as the agrarian commissions charged with distributing lands during Lázaro Cárdenas's presidency from 1934 to 1940 provided entry into political leadership. In the 1950s, political competition was based not on national parties but rather on factionalism and the contest between a gerontocracy in the upper offices of the civil religious hierarchy and a young cohort of educated indigenous men (Arias Perez 1994; Nash 1970). Co-optation of indigenous caciques characterized the monopoly of power by the ruling state Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in highland indigenous towns.⁴ With the erosion of state support for the revolutionary gains of land reform and subsidies for small plot cultivators during the Salinas presidency (1988–94), the struggle for alternatives to neoliberal policies came to a head.

Radical Democratic Mobilization, 1994–96

The explosion of these communities from the defensive boundaries in which they were incorporated is the culmination of intensified migration, commercialization, and resource exploitation during the last two decades (Collier 1994; Nash 1995). In their resistance to the contradictory policies of a government that claimed to be following the mandate of the 1910 revolution while undermining semisubsistence producers, indigenous people of Chiapas have forged alliances with mestizos (mixed blood) who share their poverty while challenging control by caciques within their communities (Nash and Sullivan 1992). The Zapatista uprising of January 1, 1994—with its brief occupation of the town hall, nearby regimental headquarters in San Cristobal de Las Casas, and the municipal buildings in gateway cities to the Lacandon rainforest by EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) troops made up of Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Chol, Tolojobal, and Mam indigenes—became world news. The event spurred social movements for land, religious freedom, and democracy within and beyond the communities in the region, drawing worldwide at-

attention to what has been called the first postmodern revolution.

Less attention has been paid to these social movements of indigenous and mestizo supporters of the uprising than to the armed encounter that lasted only two weeks. In the wake of the uprising, the Zapatistas are striving to bring about democratic changes, demanding the land and rights promised in the constitution of 1917 but never delivered. They are also seeking constitutional changes that will promote the free expression of distinct languages and cultural practices in a context of social justice. These demands reflect the roots of the movement in Zapata's 1911 Plan de Ayala and the subsequent Zapatista Ley Agraria of 1915 drafted by radical intellectuals who joined the movement (Warman 1988:326). Land redistribution was central to the reorganization of society around agrarian communities, democratic and autonomous in their exercise of rights over economic resources, the judiciary, and other political and social institutions (Warman 1988:327).

In the aftermath of the 1994 uprising, indigenous people, who constitute about a quarter of the population of Chiapas, are challenging the hegemonic control of the PRI and the "mestizocracia" (elite of mixed bloods) that dominates through it. They have seized land and taken over 38 municipalities in which the PRD (Partido Revolucionario Democrático) claimed fraud in the 1994 elections (see Gomez Cruz and Kovic 1994). Often these takeovers were followed by plebiscites or the interim structure of a *consejo* representing the opposed parties. In all of these townships, the demands go far beyond political partisanship and electoral politics. Toward this goal, the mobilized sectors of campesinos and supporters, joined by intellectuals, teachers, and professionals in what is referred to as "Civil Society," are formulating a new relationship between the governed and the governors.

The communities included in the conflict zone are in fact exercising the autonomy that the EZLN is seeking for the future. Some of the colonized settlements in the rain forest are formally included in the townships of Ocosingo, Las Margaritas, and Altamirano, all of which encompass vast territories extending into the rain forest. Officials are drawn from the mestizocracia of ranchers and entrepreneurs who do not represent the concerns of the small-holding settlers. Las Margaritas, for example, contains within its limits the self-constituted, autonomous region of El Valle Tojolabal, comprised of 37 hamlets with an indigenous population of 1,800 who support the "parliamentarians" working full-time in the offices of the *casa ejidal* and Santo Domingo Las Palmas. Their charter as autonomous indigenous pueblos was drawn up in the act of the Consejo Ejecutivo General de las Regiones Autonomas de Chiapas (General Executive Council of the Autonomous Re-

gions of Chiapas), realized in San Cristobal on January 20, 1995, in fulfillment of the declaration of autonomous regions on October 12, 1994. Their representatives act according to the constitution of 1917, as well as laws issuing from the Zapatista command that are drawn up in local municipal committees and ordained by popular vote. In the course of settling land disputes and adjudicating other issues at the local level, they are trying to put into practice a new relationship between the governed and the governing (Nash 1995).

The Region Autonoma Norte is asserting the vision of local and regional autonomy that is central to Zapatista demands in its struggles against landowners and paramilitary troops. The region, which includes the municipalities of Bochil, Jitotol, Simojovel, El Bosque, Ixtapa, Huitiupán, Soyalo, Rayón, and Pueblo Nuevo, is legally recognized by the regional congress but not by the state. The very remoteness of this area from ladino townships guaranteed a measure of autonomy in practice in the past, but throughout the summer of 1996 paramilitary troops tried to crack the solidarity of Chol-speaking communities and campesino groups as they mobilized to demand land and other services they had been denied. Among the paramilitary groups operating in the area were La Paz en Guerra and Chinchulines, which attacked a group of students in Tila and killed militants of the Party of Democratic Revolution and the Workers' Party in June (*Expreso* 1996). On June 24, 1996, *La Jornada* reported on the region's protests against the violence, using blockades of highways and demonstrations that culminated in a march by campesinos to Tuxtla to complain to the governor of Chiapas about the deaths of 14 campesinos killed by white guards "that are known to be financed by the PRI authorities" (Henriquez 1996:1, 14). Chilón, Tila, and Yajalón also mobilized protests on June 29, 1996, that were supported by campesino organizations and centers for human rights (Sol 1996). This culminated in a massive pilgrimage of Christian base communities and Civil Society led by seven bishops of the Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano (CEM).

These independent municipalities are demanding complete withdrawal of the armed forces, disarming of paramilitary groups, and legal recognition of their autonomy at the state level. But the tension increases daily as the army reinforces its presence, constructing airfields and solid barracks, and maintaining an estimated 60,000 armed troops. Women from the rain forest and the highlands have strongly denounced the presence of the army, which has attracted outside prostitutes in addition to drawing local women into the traffic. When the women's groups met for the Third State Convention of Women on May 6, 1995, they also objected to the forced domestic labor of women and men

without pay by these military personnel (Morquecho 1995).

Contradicting the program of militarization carried out by the government is the Zapatista attempt to find a peaceful solution through democratic processes. By tracing the programmatic statements made by Zapatistas and their supporters during the National Democratic Convention in July 1994 as well as the dialogues that took place from March 1994 through September 1995 (culminating in the National Indigenous Forum of January 1996 described below), I hope to show how the process they have set in motion defines a radical democratic alternative to the hierarchical imperatives of Western domination and to the armed struggle as the unique counterforce.

Dialogues for a New Democracy

Our path was always that the will of the many be in the hearts of the men and women who command. The will of the majority was the path on which he who commands should walk. If he separates his step from the path of the will of the people, the heart who commands should be changed for another who obeys. Thus was born our strength in the jungle, he who leads obeys if he is true, and he who follows leads through the common heart of true men and women. Another word came from afar so that this government was named and this work gave the name of "democracy" to our way that was from before words travelled. [*La Jornada* 1994:12, translation in Nigh 1994:9]

This communiqué from the Indigenous Clandestine Revolutionary Committee, issued just a few days before the initiation of the first dialogue in the San Cristobal cathedral, expresses the goals of the Zapatistas in words that echo the ceremonial language I have often heard. The cadence of their speech and the imagery of their language reveal the influence of Mayan poetics, even in translation. Their repeated references to what the heart says reflects the belief that true language—*batzil k'op*, any one of the five Mayan dialects spoken in the area—issues from the heart. Diviner/curers gain access to this language of the heart in their patients by pulsing them. This is done by holding their thumb over the throbbing pulse in the wrist of the patient while uttering provocative questions. When the pulse leaps, the curers who are listening and feeling (the verb *awayi* is used for both actions) learn where the problem lies. This dialogue resonates among the poor of Mexico and the world audience it is reaching.

The delegation of 15 Zapatistas arrived for the first dialogue with government representatives in San Cristobal de Las Casas on March 8, 1994. Much to the consternation of a group of *auténticos coletos*, the self-appointed descendants of conquerors in San Cristobal, the meeting was held in the 17th-century cathedral, with

Bishop Samuel Ruiz presiding as negotiator. In support of the peace talks, a Civil Society group maintained a 24-hour vigil outside the cathedral in order to prevent attacks on the negotiators. The talks received favorable attention from then-president Carlos Salinas, who agreed publicly that in the drive for modernization he had given insufficient attention to the needs of the people. He named Manuel Camacho Solís, a populist and former mayor of the Federal District, as his envoy (Golden 1994).

The demands of the Zapatistas, which I have summarized from reports of the sessions, were the basis for the discussions initiated on March 6:

(1) Autonomy of indigenous villages, including the right to use their own language in schools, public contracts, courts, and the media. As one step in the democratization of government and the recognition of plural ethnic groups, the Zapatistas proposed decentralization of the government at every level, overcoming "presidentialism" as well as control over the entire country by the Federal District and making electoral districts conform to the reality of the constituencies. From the very beginning of the talks, Subcomandante Marcos made it clear that the Zapatistas were not demanding a racially representative leadership. This in itself does not ensure responsiveness to the interests of indigenous people, as 500 years of *caciquismo* proved. Rather, the desire was to have representatives who fulfilled the will of the people, rescuing democracy from the co-optation of it by false leaders.

(2) Redistribution of large landholdings to the small-holding villages and government support for those who work the land, including agricultural machinery, fertilizers, insecticides, credit, technical aid, improved seeds, and cattle. Assurance of fair prices for crops is a prerequisite for commercial production in the international market, since Mexican farmers now face competition from subsidized U.S. producers.

(3) Support for housing, health, education, recreation, communication, and other necessities for overcoming cultural marginalization. The Zapatistas demanded services equivalent to those accorded to other communities and towns throughout the republic, such as electricity, potable water, sewage, roads, telephone communication, recreational centers, and sports.

(4) Recognition of the rights of women, attention to their special medical needs, and help in opening markets for their artisanal production. Zapatistas are credited with bringing the issue of women's rights to national attention in ways never attempted prior to the uprising.

The dialogue was suspended after the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the PRI's candidate in the 1994 presidential elections, two weeks after the closure of the first session, and was not reconvened until April 1995. During the interim, the Comisión Nacional de Intermediación (CONAI), led by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, undertook a hunger strike, which was joined by many people throughout the country, to call for a resumption of

peace talks. Indigenous people from throughout the state came to show their support for the bishop's initiative, their traditional dances and music bringing a new language into the public arena.

But peace was not on the agenda of Ernesto Zedillo's government, at the time weakened by drastic declines in the economy and disastrous revelations of PRI machinations in the Salinas government. On February 9, 1995, an estimated 60,000 soldiers broke the cease-fire agreement with the Zapatistas and invaded the Lacandon rain forest in a move to apprehend "terrorists," specifically Subcomandante Marcos and his "coconspirators." The pretext was falsified by the soldiers themselves, as they spread throughout Zapatista territory, invading houses of the people who fled to the canyons, spraying their food supplies with insecticide, killing animals, and destroying their few possessions. They also destroyed Aguascalientes, the site of the first National Democratic Congress called by the Zapatistas in July 1994, and replaced it with a permanent military installation. No press representatives, human rights observers, or even Red Cross workers were permitted within the army lines posted at the gateway cities to the jungle. Since that episode, the rain forest has been subjected to the same kind of low-intensity warfare that Guatemalan Mayans have experienced.

Despite the many provocations within the territory designated as Zapatista throughout the spring and summer of 1995, the clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous General Command Committee of the EZLN persisted in its attempts to negotiate with the government. The first encounter in San Miguel, in March 1995, after the year's hiatus caused by Colosio's death, was only able to come to an agreement on a time and place for another meeting the following month in San Andrés Larrainzar, renamed San Andrés Sakam Ch'en. Because Subcomandante Marcos was still in hiding, the seven-member delegation was led by Comandantes David and Tacho as well as Trini, a woman presenting herself as a grandmother concerned about survival of the children living in a state of siege in the rain forest. At great risk to themselves, the members of the Indigenous General Command Committee, all wearing ski masks, were escorted into the ball court where the meetings were staged in an improvised dwelling flanked by two baskets. The choice of the town was symbolically apt, even though Zapatistas preferred a site where they would have greater access to popular movements and communication media. The ritual basis for resistance is deep in San Andrés Sakam Ch'en de los Pobres and other highland indigenous towns. Sakam Ch'en was founded in the last quarter of the 16th century, during the colonial concentration of Indians. In 1850, the Tzotziles began an intense period of resistance after large landholders Ramón Federico and Manuel Larrainzar, whose surname became the first

name given to the town, acquired village lands. They, along with other highland Indians, confronted ladino landowners in the Caste War of 1867–69, when the region was opened to commercial agriculture that employed artisans, laborers, and mule drivers. The consolidation of ladino power led to the dislocation of Indians from the town center and their economic and political subordination. The indigenous community reinforced its cohesion after 1974, when they initiated actions for the restitution of communal lands. These actions convinced many ladino families to emigrate, leaving indigenous religious officials in charge of the church and the town hall. The most recent expression of rebelliousness was the election of a PRD candidate as mayor. As a result, the army moved in late 1994 and withdrew to its present barracks, only 400 meters from the center of the town, in partial compliance with the conditions of the dialogue.

Even the selection of the ball court as the site for the house constructed for the dialogue was symbolically appropriate. Like their ancestors, the Mayans played out their politics on the ball court, willing to risk death, just as ancient players risked the ritual death awaiting the losers.⁵

At 10 a.m. on April 12, I joined the "security belt" of international observers from the United States, Germany, and France, along with national observers, college students from branches of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México throughout the country, artists, development workers, teachers, merchants, housewives—some of them with their children—all of whom had come to support the Zapatistas and discourage an attack by the Mexican armed forces stationed just 400 meters from the town center. Over 450 press representatives from around the world—television crews, radio reporters, and photojournalists who had registered with the government's Commission of Agreement and Peacemaking (COCOPA)—were positioned just beyond the ball court with a huge dish antenna set up in the plaza to relay their news to the world.

The most extraordinary presence was that of the indigenous people. Throughout the morning, quietly and without any disturbances, over 7,000 indigenous people from the hill communities and ejido settlements in the rain forest filed into the roped off section between the Red Cross and the international observers (see Figure 1). Villagers who had for hundreds of years defended their separate identity within the boundaries of their corporate communities were joined in the security belt created to defend the Zapatista negotiating team. They were here in a festive mood, optimistic about the success of their venture. In their handloomed *huipiles* and tunics, they were a living embodiment of the movement for a pluricultural democratic society, tolerant of differences and respectful of others.



Figure 1

Indigenous members of Civil Society await government representative for dialogue in San Andrés, April 1995. Photo by June Nash.

They waited for the arrival of the COCOPA throughout the day. The Zapatista delegation remained inside the hastily constructed hut on the ball court for fear of an attack; the CONAI members moved restlessly in and out of the improvised hut; indigenous security guards occupied themselves reading copies of *El Tiempo* and preparing their food or nursing babies; press representatives drank, dozed, and tested their equipment.

Late in the afternoon, word came from the government representatives. They claimed that the indigenous peoples' signs of support for the Zapatistas were a violation of the agreements for the peace talks. Comandante Tacho's response pointed to the paradox that while it was the Zapatistas who were under attack by the military and the white guards of the cattlemen, the government representatives were the ones who expressed fear, "in the presence of thousands of unarmed indigenous men, women and children" (Zuniga M. and Gil Olmos 1995:14). He urged these supporters to leave as requested by the COCOPA, since the government representatives refused to meet until they had gone. In-

digenous leaders of the State Democratic Assembly of the Chiapas Pueblo defended the mobilization of indigenous:

We came here of our own will and with our own resources. We came because those who took up arms and shed their blood are here awaiting the disposition of the federal government to dialogue. Because the demands of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation are ours, our cause is the same: democracy, justice, liberty and peace with dignity. [Zuniga M. and Gil Olmos 1995:14]

Responding to the urgings of the EZLN commanders and the CONAI, the Indians abandoned their positions and withdrew to their communities. When the Indians left, the government representatives finally agreed to come into the ball court and, after a brief exchange, agreed to return the next day. On the following day, when I arrived in town I found it had been transformed into a military encampment. Two hundred and sixty military police stood guard—with raincoats draped over their meter-long billy clubs and crash helmets in position—two feet from one another, one facing forward and the other backward, circling the ball court

and conference house as well as the town hall, forming a third ring outside the Red Cross and the security belt of peace forces. Two of their commanders communicated to the troops and to the high military command located in their base camp with advanced radio technology. Red Cross and peace security force participants had to step inside a metal detector armed by several military police in order to take their places. These were the only conditions under which the governmental delegation would consent to speak.

The leadership shown by the State Democratic Assembly of Indigenous Pueblos in the tense 48 hours of the dialogue was an impressive demonstration of democracy and restraint in the face of immense provocation. The government, in contrast, presented their demands in an intransigent manner leaving little room for negotiation. In the final agreement, the government rejected the Zapatista demand that the zone be demilitarized and yielded only to positioning army troops outside the centers of the towns in which they were stationed. They claimed that they would suspend the investigation of members of the high command, end the orders of apprehension, and permit the surveillance of the area by the National Commission of Human Rights. The militarization of the zone remained intact, with substantial barracks in Altamirana, Las Margaritas (where most of the armed encounters occurred during the 12 days of the uprising), San Andrés, Simojovel, and Tenejapa. Patrols were actually increased after the dialogue in May, "putting at risk the dialogue and the peacemaking process," according to the *Coordinación de Organismos No-Gubernamentales por la Paz (CONPAZ)* (Lopez and Correa 1995).

During the slump that followed the aborted dialogues, the EZLN carried out one of the most innovative acts ever undertaken by a revolutionary force. In June 1995, they called upon "the citizens of Mexico and the world" to participate in a plebiscite in the nation and throughout the world. Initially six questions were phrased at a meeting on June 27 in San Andrés Sakam Ch'en, with opportunities for each network to delineate its own program. The plebiscite was to be conducted via e-mail, fax, and plebiscite tables within Mexico. In the call, the EZLN starts out with the declaration:

We are Mexicans and we have a national proposal: to struggle for and achieve democracy, liberty, and justice for all the men and women of this country. We are here to say that we are human beings and we have a worldwide proposal: a new international order based on and ruled by democracy, liberty, and justice.

I attended one such session in Hostos College, organized by Courtney Guthrie. The most crucial alternatives were phrased in the second and fourth questions: Should the different democratizing forces (in Mexico)

unite in a citizens' broadly based political and social opposition front and struggle for the 16 principal demands? Or should the EZLN convert itself into a new and independent political force, without joining other political organizations? The other questions were mostly rhetorical: Do you agree that the principal demands of the Mexican people are land, housing, jobs, food, health, education, culture, information, independence, democracy, liberty, justice, peace, security, combat of corruption, and defense of environment? Should Mexicans carry out a profound political reform that would guarantee democracy and so forth? The votes counted in August indicated that half a million people supported the first propositions, and the interest created in the plebiscite, more than any other event, convinced the government to go back to the table and talk.

With the resumption of the dialogues in September 1995, also held in San Andrés Sakam Ch'en with a heavy military presence, the Zapatistas succeeded in moving the process for peace and democracy to a new level. The participants engaged in six sessions: community and autonomy, justice, political representation, the status and rights of women, access to media, and promotion and development of indigenous culture.

The government representatives were not nearly as well prepared as the EZLN, and they were reluctant to deviate from their prepared program. But their intermediaries, the PRI-appointed agents of the Instituto Nacional Indígena, were ignored, and the indigenous representatives made it clear that the conflict between the state and *pueblos indios* (the term applied repeatedly in the context of the negotiations) "could only be resolved in the framework of a profound reformulation of the state, modifying at the root the daily forms of public life that generate and reproduce domination, discrimination and racism" (*Ce-Acatl* 1995:6). Given the shaky condition of the PRI government, with Zedillo commanding only a 12 percent approval rating, the government could not afford a public rebuttal of their position, and so they yielded on most of the points.

The autonomy of indigenous pueblos became the center of the debates concerning the new relationship of the pueblos indígenas with the state. Clearly this required a careful reassessment of the concrete provisions guiding the new relationship. After all, indigenous people had, during 500 years of colonization, defended themselves against ladino domination. But in the past, local communities remained fragmented by *caciquismo* and the co-optation of leadership. In the current struggles, indigenous people are beginning to unite in regional and national movements such as La Nación Purepecha, Consejos Guerrerense 500 Años, Pueblos de la Sierra Norte, and Regiones Pluriétnicas Autónomas (RAP) and have arrived at some consensus in meetings

in Sonora, Baja California, Oaxaca, and the state of Mexico (Harvey 1994; Stephen 1994).

Much of the discussion focused on the constitutional changes needed to reformulate state-local relations in such a way as to recognize the pluriethnic character of the nation. The Zapatistas suggested reworking Articles 4, 73, 115, and 116 to establish the autonomy of indigenous communities to be recognized as juridical entities. They argued for a return to Article 27 as it was before its "reform" by the Salinas government, which effectively abolished the land reform program and allowed for the private use and sale of existing ejido grants. This reform, passed in 1991 (Nash and Kovic 1996), was one of the precipitating causes of the Zapatista uprising since it was the key article in establishing the independent basis of the small-holder economy.

Autonomy was the key demand in the Zapatista attempt to gain recognition of the plural character of society with harmonious articulation rather than the old domination of pueblos indios at the core. In their discussions, Don Antonio's qualification of the meaning of equality was invoked. In the past, the Zapatistas pointed out, equality has been interpreted as sameness, not allowing for differences. While they agreed that economic and social inequalities ought to be eliminated, the goal was not to arrive at cultural sameness:

There are no cultural universals, no concepts or criteria based on cultures. Anytime that anyone thinks or feels, when she or he conceives of the other or her- or himself, they do it from their culture, from a specific manner of being in the world that no one can elude, and that characterizes the fundamental plurality of social reality. [*Ce-Acatl* 1995:22]

In a phrase that catapults the Zapatistas into the post-modern condition, they conclude that "we are all Mexicans, but each lives and feels his or her Mexicanness differently" (*Ce-Acatl* 1995:22).

The autonomy the Zapatistas seek is not the cosmetic autonomy of local rights but a recognition of regional institutions to resolve agrarian conflicts peacefully and legally, to give both men *and* women (who had been excluded from the land reform of the 1910 revolution) access to land through the offices of an agrarian tribunal that would be funded adequately in order to purchase an expanded ejido. This would provide the material base for a fortified autonomy.

Another alternative posed by the Zapatistas involved the political process itself. The Zapatistas rejected the electoral process through parties dominated by the mestizocracia, calling for a return to indigenous practices related to the civil religious hierarchy. Considered the key institution in defining Indianness, the civil religious hierarchy was, in fact, introduced by the Spaniards during the colonial period. The system has al-

ternately been condemned for draining social surpluses from the community and extolled for its success in enabling indigenous people to resist the domination of ladino institutions. Since there is an element of truth in both these positions, it is extremely difficult to assess the political outcome of such an approach. It would certainly reinforce the gerontocracy that characterized indigenous political life, but only a strong, politically informed dialogue between generations and among indigenous action groups can overcome the tendencies to co-optation and caciquismo.

Autonomy was also a key element in development programs for the pueblos indigenas, which allocated funds on the basis of a percentage of the gross national product. The most provocative material demand related to autonomy in development regards the rights to resources of the soil and subsoil. In Chiapas, these resources include the ocean of oil beneath the Zapatista territory, as well as the swiftly flowing rivers, which produce 52 percent of the electricity for the state. Education and health programs were to be self-administered to ensure the valorization of the history and culture of pueblos indios, as well as their knowledge of medicine and herbs. This point was vigorously expressed in the session on the rights of women, where the contribution of native practitioners in midwifery was asserted (*Ce-Acatl* 1995:32).

In addressing the human rights of women, the text of the Zapatista negotiations recognizes (but very summarily) the potential conflict between autonomy and universal rights. In the summary report of the women's rights platform, we read that "the practice of local customs should never validate violations of women's rights" (*Ce-Acatl* 1995:44), but the question of violence against women in the often patriarchal pueblos indios, and the abuse of power by diviner/curers, or those who claim to possess three or more souls, is not addressed.⁶ These realities cannot be dismissed simply as the expression of a dominating alien culture but must be dealt with as an indigenous phenomenon.

The Zapatistas made it clear during the September 1995 dialogue that alternatives to government plans for development cannot be realized within the existing neoliberal framework of an export-oriented, cash-crop, and privatized economy. The attempt by representatives of the government to limit the dialogue to the state of Chiapas was clearly overcome in the September meetings and their follow-up in November. The meetings were hailed by both sides as the most successful since the preliminary meetings in March 1994 (Preston 1995).

The Zapatistas celebrated the second anniversary of the uprising on New Year's eve in four newly constructed Aguascalientes, named after the location of the first National Democratic Assembly in August 1994, which was completely destroyed when government

troops invaded the Lacandon forest on February 9, 1995. As the residents of the four sites worked on the construction of their amphitheatres, military vehicles tore through the sites and soldiers harassed those assisting in the work. In one case, women and children of Oventic—the site called for one of the celebrations outside of San Andrés Sakam Ch'en—surrounded a jeep bearing artillery weapons and shook their fists at the soldiers, telling them to leave. In another encounter, townspeople surrounded a lone soldier, whose accent revealed that he was from San Juan Chamula, and berated him for being in the army and fighting his own people. The New Year's festivities proceeded without major incident, and the hosts invited their guests to attend the National Indigenous Forum in San Cristobal that began January 3, 1996.

The Fiesta of the Word

The four-day meetings of the National Indigenous Forum, which Comandante David called “the fiesta of the word,” were attended by indigenous people from throughout the country, as well as visitors from Argentina, France, Switzerland, the United States, Canada, Germany, Holland, and Ireland. The talks signaled the birth of a political front, named the Zapatista National Liberation Front, “a civil, peaceful organization, independent and democratic, Mexican and national that fights for democracy, liberty and justice in Mexico,” in Subcomandante Marcos’s words (in the *Cuarta declaración de la selva Lacandona*, January 1, 1996). But while the Zapatistas handed over their arms, the government continued to carry out the low-intensity warfare in the rain forest.

My request to attend the forum, approved by Marcos and registered with COCOPA, enabled me to join the 400 or more indigenous representatives from throughout the nation who attended, along with academics, writers, and supporters from Civil Society. The agreements reached during the September dialogue were summarized in the presence of 24 members of the Zapatista high command. The Zapatistas still wore ski masks, since they were still threatened with apprehension or even assassination attempts, and Subcomandante Marcos appeared only briefly. They spoke only at the plenary and the beginning of the discussions in each of the six tables. They were there to listen to the discussion by indigenes from other regions.

Tacho addressed the assembly on January 3, urging the indigenous people of Mexico to speak with their own voice without asking for permission and to join in constructing a world where everyone loves without the need to dominate others. Chiding “the government that we have now” for wanting “to kill, buy, and silence us,”

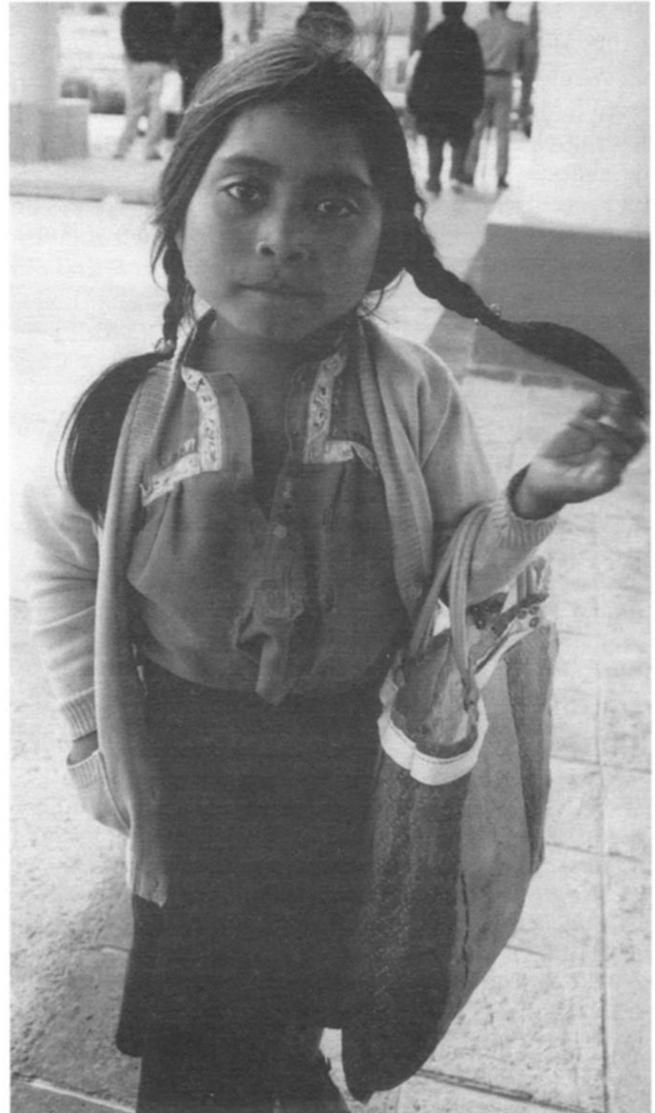


Figure 2
Chamula girl selling Zapatista dolls at National Indigenous Forum, January 6, 1996. Photo by June Nash.

he declared that “now we must form a new nation.” He invoked the meaning of being indigenous in this new movement.

We are indigenous people; we have suffered centuries of rejection, of persecution, of abandonment, of death. Many times the oppressor has had white skin, but other times death and treason has had dark skin and our same language. The good path also takes on the word of men and women of white skin and of a different language. In the world that the Zapatistas want, all skin colors fit, all the languages and all the paths. The good world has many ways and many paths. And in those paths there is respect and dignity.

The speech was signed with the names of Subcomandante Marcos, David, and Tacho (NCDM 1997).

Tacho set the pace with his opening attack on the neoliberal policies of the government, a theme that was picked up by an indigenous woman leader from Oaxaca, Bartola Morales Garcia. She excoriated a government that represents only capital interests while ignoring the indigenous people who have suffered more from the reductions of the past ten years than any other group. The newly reconstituted COCOPA celebrated the formation of the Zapatista movement as a political force, and the leader of the group, Castillo, promised to bring the results of the deliberation to the legislature. Although many who attended the meeting criticized the COCOPA's failure to censure the army's continued presence in the rain forest, there was a growing approval of the new members' mediation at the forum.

Throughout the five days of meetings, all who attended were allowed to speak, even foreign visitors. The Zapatistas came as listeners and watchers, and except for the opening speeches they maintained an alert audience for what their invited guests said. In the compulsive speechifying of modernizing politics in Mexico, as in the United States, this is a remarkable feature. It is derived from a custom of village politics: each evening *principales* (elders who have passed through the civil-religious hierarchy) and police officers sit quietly on the benches at the town hall, watching and listening to the people. In my early field study, I was told that the principal duties of the officials were "to sit and watch."

The wide range of representation was evident. People who had never attended a national meeting spoke for the first time of conditions in their pueblos, as did leaders from the popular movements who had been active in politics since the revolutionary decade of the 1920s, academics, and intellectuals. Denunciations of the government's mistreatment of people were heard in all the sessions. The representatives from Guerrero, who had fled as mounted police rode into their villages, spoke of the massacre of their people. The women's session was the most hostile, with charges of domination by mestizas entering into the final report. People were careful to include nonindigenous along with indigenous needs in their statements. A leader of the indigenous proletarian organization called for indigenous representation on the councils; a Huichol asked that their pueblos be freed from religious impositions and called for the self-management of their language; a representative of the Pueblos Autonomos de Chipango talked of the loss of the youth who migrate for lack of land; a representative of the homosexuals of Oaxaca proposed that there be translators in all places of justice and that the abuse of women and minors should be brought to justice. The impressive variety and forcefulness of these popular representatives embodied the aspirations for a pluriethnic and pluripolitical governance of the country.

Sunday's plenary session was marked by the sacred atmosphere typical of village celebrations. Pine needles were strewn on the floor of the Casa de Cultura, potted palms were placed about, and copal incense was swung by officiants to purify the air as the people congregated in the large auditorium. Government representatives of COCOPA and CONAI took their places at a semicircular podium. Then the 24 Zapatistas filed into the room, along with the women who acted as their security guards, and as they took their seats, they were joined by Marcos. Tacho reiterated their desire that the struggle for land would continue without fratricidal warfare, as they sought a harmonious recognition of cultural variety. He summed up the constitutional changes needed to arrive at an autonomous, pluralistic form of jurisprudence and administration by indigenous pueblos. Self-organization, self-definition, and self-rule were the themes of the "Carta Magna" of the future. Marcos spoke very briefly, referring to the rainbow they saw as they rode out of the jungle that portended a peaceful outcome of the conflict.

David opened the plenary session on Monday, January 8, with what sounded to me like a counterpoint to Tacho's opening remarks on January 3. He stated that the assembled group did not have to seek the permission of the government to speak their own words and instead asked permission of Tatik Dueno de la Creación, the Lord Father of all Creation, to begin "la gran fiesta de la palabra en el gran pais de Mexico" (the great fiesta of the word in the great country of Mexico). Each of the raconteurs for the six sessions summarized the discussions in their sessions. Antonio Hernandez Cruz, of the third session on Indigenous Political Participation, invoking the great tradition of treating political authorities as parents, outlined the new political pact with the state within the framework of a new constitution: Communication between government agencies and local authorities should be promoted, with provisions for conferences of indigenous pueblos in regional assemblies and settlement of land conflicts with autonomous regional councils. Among the points called for were changes in the electoral law to include indigenous customs in choosing their representatives, the constitution of autonomous regions embracing pueblos indigenas, the participation of women in government at all levels, and an ongoing critique of the methods and practices of self-government. The rights of women in employment and women who were forced to migrate should be recognized and made explicit in the governance of pueblos.

Tuesday's program opened with a quasi-spiritual ceremony conducted by the Hermandad Chol Sisterhood/Brotherhood of Chol speakers. They were a motley group; some of the women were dressed in the ladina clothing of poor countrywomen while a few were wearing the backstrap-loomed woolen skirts of Chamu-

las. Some of the speakers carried candles and flowers. Two men with ponchos and straw hats typical of the northern states and a very tall, almost gringo-looking young man carrying an incense pot with copal completed the ensemble. Like a pageant celebrating multiculturalism, they circled the room, stopping to pray at each compass point. Facing east, they prayed "for the new day, the new light, as the Father-Sun teaches us to be brothers, as we show and share this work, so we all benefit." Facing west, they invoked the "Lord who will listen to our prayer here in San Cristobal, thanks to the Lord Father, thanks to the benediction of justice and dignity, the Father Sun who rules us directed us to pass here and raise ourselves up, the Sun who is the one who created this sun; we unite in this fight, if there is no food there is no peace." Facing north, they spoke, "Those who came here from the north to see our misery taught us this religion. They established their superiority over us. We now say they are not superior; the north is no longer a symbol of superiority. The north is now converted to a symbol of equality, the place where a new life in which we live in equality will come." Facing south, the hermandad prayed, "The god of the south comes with the true voice; we ask him to help our siblings." One of the woman then spoke in Chol, saying, "In this forum, let us walk together," then uttered the Lord's prayer, ending with "In the reign of peace with justice and dignity," followed by a song in Tzeltal. Bearing aloft a flaming candle, a woman spoke the *Snichinal k'op*, the flowery word.

The whites came 503 years ago to destroy us, but the *cieba* [sacred plant of the Maya] was not destroyed since its roots are deep. May all its flowers flourish; with water it can kill us or it can save us. We live from the fruit of the land that comes with water. If there is no water, we do not live. The light signifies the life from the night that might kill us. Some who have an evil heart must change; those who want to stultify our work cannot do it. Thus we carry this light so that it is not put out. With our money, with our desire, we will light our way with this light. We will go forward to progress. We speak to the Mother Earth, the Father Sun through the media of the roots which are the passage to make us siblings. The Mother here holds the land that is a gift that she gives with open hands. We speak with the youths who help us with the writing, with the ancients who have the gift of their experience in the school of life. To the siblings who convoked this assembly, we unite with our creation, Lord the Father, Lord the Mother [Tatik Tiosh, Me'tik Tiosh], the movement of liberation.

After this stunning pageant, wedding together traditions retained from the Mayan past and those imposed by the Spanish conquest, embodied in the motley genetic pool with young and old, men and women sitting and standing together (in contrast to sex-segregated villagers), the assembly opened for its final phase. Appropriately,

the word passed to Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who in his own lifetime traversed the road from conventional Christianity to liberation theology and awakened to the voices of his indigenous parishioners. He spoke of "the road of difference, the road of enrichment," invoking the same couplets that are a part of all Mayan prayer forms.

In our living together, working for change, with the participation of women, all are signs of change in our life and not only in our hope. The pueblos that live together, those of the north who live in "the time of the Indian," we thought they would die, but they are surging forward. The old say it will not happen in two or three days. Some who continue with their own language have reinforced it. Others who have experienced change, reinforced it. In this continent and in this world, we do not speak of fantasies but of reality. We are making history. The search for peace is not lost. The road is much broader than contemplated. We live now in the firm hope for open spaces for a long peace.

The harmonious interweaving of several layers of culturally differentiated syntaxes, with the mingling of Spanish, Chol, and Tzeltal resounding in the cavernous space of the overflowing auditorium, was a living expression of the aspirations of the forum. The bishop's speech was clearly influenced by the cadence and linked couplets of Mayan speech.

A month after the forum in San Cristobal, Zapatista leaders announced in San Andrés Sakam Ch'en that they would sign an agreement with the government, clearing the way for a final peace accord. Tacho indicated that the group who represented the Zapatistas in San Cristobal had consulted with dozens of thousands of colonizers in the rain forest and that 96 percent of them had endorsed the accord (Moore 1996; Preston 1996). The accord charts "a new relation between the state and the indigenous people" throughout Mexico, requiring changes in practice at state and national levels as well as constitutional reforms. Recognition of the "autonomy" of indigenous pueblos, their right to "multicultural" education, including teaching in their own languages, and "adequate" representation in local and national congresses are the basic conditions in this accord, which is only one of six sets of negotiations under way (Preston 1996). Specifically, indigenous communities will be exempt from the national requirement that they must be members of a political party to present candidates in elections. The Zapatistas made it clear to reporters that they "want to shift from an Indian army to an unarmed leftist pressure group" (Preston 1996:A12), a change in status which was in fact achieved during the January 1996 forum. Further negotiations over issues of land, resource shares for the riches contained within indigenous areas, and social justice regarding human rights violations are expected to take months to reach a final accord.

Forging a New Federalism

In the pluripolitical, plurireligious, and pluricultural settings in colonizing areas of the Lacandon rain forest and in the urban barrios to which highland indigenous people who have dissented from the policies of the caciques have been forced to migrate, we find the social movements that are forging a new understanding of what the modernist values of liberty, democracy, and equality might be in the postmodern world. The paradoxical emergence of the most marginalized sectors in the global capitalist system as the center of opposition to neoliberal advance is a response to the latest and most predatory stage in the advance of late capitalism. As Xavier Albo, who is well acquainted with the indigenous nations throughout the continent, has said, these small groups "not only manage to survive but may also constitute the basic cell of the social regeneration of the continent" (1995:31). They are the least demoralized by the hegemonic institutions controlled by client states. Their vision of progress still contains the communal values that are found in mythopoetic traditions that survive from the prequest period. Accustomed to cultural diversity, they have learned to live with it, not attempting to eradicate or dominate the others in their midst. Far from being primordial remnants of a past, the behaviors and beliefs of the groups engaged in the struggle have been enacted continually in everyday life since the conquest.⁷ The communitarian values and institutions might provide a model for pluriethnic and pluripolitical institutions as we enter the third millennium.

Notes

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1. Gossen 1986; Gossen and Leventhal 1993; B. Tedlock 1982; D. Tedlock 1985.

2. MacLeod 1973; Wasserstrom 1983; Wolf 1957.

3. On alcoholism, see Eber 1994 and Sivert 1973. On witch-hunts, see Nash 1967. On abusive families, see Rosenbaum 1993. On expulsion of those charged with violating custom, see Kovic 1995, Sullivan 1995, and Tickell 1991.

4. Arias Perez 1994; Nash 1994; Rus 1994.

5. The game of basketball played by the contemporary Mayans is considered to be a U.S. sport initiated in Springfield, Massachusetts, by James Naismith, a YMCA community worker. Folk historians of Plainfield, Massachusetts, claim that he learned the game from a woman missionary who was inspired by her visit to Mayan ceremonial ball courts in Chichén Itzá. Based on her vision of the ball court and the bas-relief of players, she invented the game that she taught to children of Plainfield for their winter recreation. At first, the

baskets were placed on a vertical plane such as that she had seen in Chichén Itzá, but since she used stiff baskets of the type employed by the people of Plainfield to store potatoes and peaches, the hoop was converted from a vertical plane as the Mayans did with their stone hoop to a flat plane so the ball would fall through rather than having it become suspended on the lip of the basket. During a summer field session in Plainfield, Naismith learned the game and formulated some of the rules that now characterize this national sport. Drawing from the Popol Vuh, the Quiché Maya Bible, the ball game played by the twin heroes of the upper world with the lords of the underworld was a contest to keep the motion of the sun and the moon in their cycles, allowing the grandmother moon to bring the refreshing rains and rest of the night following the heat of the sun that would otherwise burn the crops if the night did not follow day.

6. Alfonso Villa Rojas (1990), one of the first indigenous anthropologists, documents the many violations of human rights within the township of Oxchuc, where the rule by elders prejudicing women and young men led to abuses of public beatings and extreme economic and political exploitation in the 1940s, when he was doing fieldwork. When Protestant missionaries arrived, over 5,000 Oxchuceños converted to Protestantism within a short period, so eager were the indigenous inhabitants to escape the domination of local elders and curers (Villa Rojas 1990). In Amatenango I was present during an outbreak of witch-hunting, as the townspeople attacked diviner/curers who had abused their powers (Nash 1967). This abusive young cohort had usurped power with the waning control of the principales, those elders who had passed in both the civil and religious offices, thereby gaining "heat," a metaphor for power from the sun to vanquish evil powers (cf. Guitéras Holmes 1961). Town officials succeeded in quelling their powers, but it was done extralegally, with condemnations in kangaroo courts, followed by Mafia-style hits.

7. See, for example, Fernando Calderón's (1995) discussion of Indian identity in the postmodern world.

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