

## **Indigenous Movements in Mexico: Impasse or Forward Motion?**

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My first ethnographic study in Mexico was of the people who worked on a gigantic landed estate or *hacienda* before the revolutionary land reform: they saw themselves as mestizos and often used the disparaging diminutive “inditos” to refer to people from the neighbouring P’urhépecha indigenous communities of the highlands. Ironically, many of these *ex-peones* descended from the numerous Africans and mulattos brought into the region to work on the sugar haciendas. But they could not recognise this element in their historical identity, since as migrants to the U.S. they had become antagonistic to Afro-Americans. This is one, less attractive, side of transnational relations. But it is symptomatic of other political effects of globalisation that the new millennium witnessed the birth of *black* identity politics in some Afro-descendent communities on the coast of Guerrero state. As in the case of Colombia, where black movements have become far more extensive, we could see these new developments as a reflection of the impact that indigenous movements have had over the last couple of decades and in particular of the recognition that indigenous demands have received from national governments and multilateral agencies such as the International Labour Organization and the World Bank. They also reflect the increasingly significant role that NGOs are now playing as mediators between grassroots movements and national and supranational institutions of governance. Indigenous rights movements do, however, also seem to reflect a historically rooted sense of identity. One of the most important questions we need to ask about Mexican history is how and why some Mexicans and not others preserve that identity.

### **Locating indigenous people in contemporary Mexican society**

The vast majority of Mexicans today do not, of course, see themselves as indigenous. Three quarters of them now live in urban not rural places, and a substantial minority gain their livelihoods by crossing international frontiers as migrants. Migrant remissions are now Mexico’s largest source of foreign earnings. If we do not start with those basic facts, we will not reach an adequate diagnosis of the significance of, and challenges facing, Mexico’s indigenous movements today. Indeed, we will fail even to understand the contemporary situation of indigenous people themselves, since millions of them now live and work in major cities and migration of various kinds is extensive.

Some indigenous people work in agribusiness in Mexico. Much of this movement is from South to North. Indigenous workers replace local mestizo labourers who have moved on to focus exclusively on work in the U.S. One of the best-known examples of the domestic migration of indigenous people is the use of workers from Oaxaca state by the agribusiness of Baja California, which has attracted considerable media attention, initially because racial stereotyping underpinned abysmal living and working conditions and flagrant violations of Mexico’s labour protection laws, but more recently because these Mixtec workers have mounted strikes and protests.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a vast amount of movement that remains invisible to the public, and to human rights activists, elsewhere along the Pacific Coast, as I discovered when I was working in the area between Lázaro Cárdenas city, on the border between Michoacán and Guerrero, and the agribusiness zone that stretches from the northern border of Michoacán through Colima to the port of Manzanillo. Here we even see migrants from Oaxaca replacing local indigenous workers as the latter have found new livelihoods as

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<sup>1</sup> Martínez Novo 2004.

international migrants or in some of the most inaccessible communities, sowing marijuana or opium poppies. This tells us something about the continuing impacts of sustained rural crisis and uneven development, but if we go to Mexico's own southern frontier, we find ample evidence that, from the point of view of indigenous people, Mexico is often to Central Americans what the U.S. is to Mexicans: a step up in a larger regional race to the bottom for labour, which is fraught with very real personal hazards. Working illegally in Mexico not only involves dealing with the immigration authorities but also with the Maras, the gangs that now operate throughout Central America and prey upon vulnerable migrants as they try to get a foothold across the border.

The Maras are another face of transnationalism. These gangs were born in Los Angeles, not El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, or Guatemala. They are the legacy of regional problems of intervention, displacement, and social polarisation in which the U.S. also plays a central role.

That brings me back to the fundamental issue of migration across Mexico's northern border and its effects. Both seasonal and more permanent migrations to the U.S. have a long history which I cannot recapitulate here. But the point I need to stress is that indigenous people are being incorporated into this human exodus today on a far greater scale than in the past, and at a moment at which U.S. policies are making it increasingly difficult for poorer people who make it alive across the border to return home again. Some indigenous communities in Mexico do have long traditions of international migration: this would include the P'urhépecha zone of Michoacán, the state which has now returned to first place in the international migration league table in a way that affects the lives of all social classes and ethnic groups very profoundly. But international migration even from Chiapas has increased dramatically in recent decades and, with *narcocorridos*<sup>2</sup> blaring out of every radio, is increasingly becoming the dream of many young people even in some of the communities where there is still strong support for the Zapatistas. In fact, one of the unintended effects of NGO intervention in Chiapas has been to foster the idea that escaping the country could be the best route to further social mobility on the part of some community activists, but relatively austere lives in economic terms clearly always encourage some people to "vote with their feet" and experiment with some kind of migration.

Nevertheless, international migration is not necessarily about disappearing over the horizon and does not even necessarily imply cutting ties even when people stay away for long periods of time. Although there are still more stay-at-homes than migrants in a state such as Oaxaca, international *transmigration* has had social, cultural, and political impacts on Oaxaca that are disproportionate to its scale. Many of the Mixtecs who found work in Baja went on to try their luck across the border.<sup>3</sup> Today anthropologists habitually refer to a new transnational region termed Oaxacalifornia as the space within which Mixtec culture, society and politics evolves, a space that not only includes the Mixtec communities located in California and Oaxaca, but large colonies in Northern Mexican cities such as Tijuana.<sup>4</sup> The point is that this space remains socially and politically connected. Those who remain in Oaxaca struggle to keep the migrants active members of their communities by insisting that they continue to participate in sponsoring fiestas and holding community offices or face loss of their rights of "membership". Sometimes the migrants themselves take the initiative in fostering projects for

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<sup>2</sup> *Narcocorridos* are the latest incarnation, usually backed by an accordion-based polka rhythm, of a long-established mestizo song genre, the *corrido*. *Corridos* have always celebrated the lives of bandits and illegal immigrants as well as the struggle with life and love of poor people in general, but their extension to drug traffickers by northern Mexican bands such as the Sinaloan group *Los Tigres del Norte* have made them controversial for mainstream media and hugely popular with ordinary people throughout the country.

<sup>3</sup> Kearney 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Besserer 2002.

community ecological rehabilitation, public works, and local political battles: some of these are against local community bosses or *caciques*, others to strengthen the community's independence against non-indigenous neighbours and powerful regional economic and political actors.

Oaxaca itself is a tremendously fragmented place, both because of its ethnic diversity and because its municipalities are very small.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to many other regions in which indigenous people live, the boundaries of the municipality and local indigenous community often coincide, whereas elsewhere a variety of indigenous communities that are sometimes in conflict with each other over land boundaries or timber exploitation are subordinated to municipal centres controlled by mestizos. This has made it easier to implement a specific style of indigenous autonomy legislation at state level in Oaxaca, the *usos y costumbres* system in which election of political representatives can optionally be done either by conventional secret ballot or through the consensus obtained in a communal assembly. In some Oaxacan communities, candidates are not allowed to run as members of national political parties, and Oaxacans are not alone in arguing that political party competition disrupts community life by promoting factionalism and subordinating community interests to outside agendas. The potential pitfall of this approach is that it may simply disguise the way that groups within the community may remain closely tied to particular political parties and more importantly, the way their leaders maintain links with wider networks of power and influence that will affect the way they discharge their responsibilities and the kinds of policies they advocate and implement. The other limitation of the Oaxacan indigenous laws is that they do not address indigenous demands that concern control over resources and the social rights that are so central to addressing the problems of poverty and marginalisation which diminish the lives of so many of Mexico's indigenous citizens.

### **Why indigenous rights matter**

That brings me to one final point of qualification before I say more about Chiapas and then try to assess the significance of indigenous social movements in Mexico as a whole. On aggregate, Mexico's rural indigenous citizens remain its most disadvantaged citizens, not only in economic terms and in terms of access to public services, but in terms of civil and human rights. Indigenous people are less likely to receive due process of law than anyone else in a country in which judicial reform remains a priority even for citizens living more comfortable lives. Despite the efforts of domestic and foreign NGO workers and peace campers, the counter-insurgency campaign in Chiapas revealed the structural racism still endemic to much of Mexican society, and not only in the routine humiliation of indigenous men through the symbolic feminisation to which they were routinely subject by the Mexican army.<sup>6</sup> False criminal charges have often been laid against Zapatista sympathisers unable to defend themselves effectively due to language barriers. But at least Chiapas has seen efforts to improve this situation, not only through the work of the human rights NGOs, but also through the training of bilingual indigenous defenders able to navigate the labyrinth of the official justice system and press for more acceptable standards of evidence and due process.

Things remain very different in the region in which I last did fieldwork in Mexico, the coastal sierras of Michoacán state, inhabited by Náhuatl-speakers who have, unusually, managed to defend control of much of the communal land they were guaranteed by the colonial state through to the present despite some vigorous attempts to dispossess them at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Currently plagued by the drug wars relating

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen 2000.

to control of the cocaine and heroin trades between the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels, this kind of region has no human rights observers nor NGO presence to offer protection from abuse by the military or judicial police that so often affects indigenous communities caught up in problems in which they play no part whatsoever. One of the problems that indigenous people often face is that the so-called “war against drugs” becomes a pretext for interventions that serve more political ends, as has frequently been the case in Chiapas and Guerrero as well as many regions of Michoacán, but beyond that there remains an embedded problem of institutional racism and mundane, everyday discrimination that must be recognised as one of the principal justifications of the whole indigenous rights movement.

This is not to say, however, that all indigenous people in Mexico are poor, marginalised and victimised. Some indigenous communities are quite prosperous and many indigenous communities are socially differentiated. There have always been indigenous elites of some kind, and the political and economic power of those elites has often been a major cause of local conflict historically. Indigenous communities have displayed considerable political activism in the past, even if they were often defeated, and some have become quite aggressive in recent years. Chiapas is often portrayed, misleadingly, as a place that missed out on the revolutionary land reform. Yet the land reform of the 1930s under President Cárdenas was the foundation of the political bossism for which some of the communities of Highland Chiapas became famous in the later 20th century, and the *fincas* or landed estates in the Tojolabal zone in the south of Chiapas had already all but disappeared by the time of the EZLN rebellion in 1994.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the state, the 1960s and 1970s saw an increasing assertiveness on the part of indigenous communities. This led to a whole range of new experiments in indigenous politics and organisation and also provoked the exit of mestizo families that had been living inside indigenous settlements. These processes were paralleled in many other parts of the country; so let me now try to explain why.

### **How indigenous Mexicans became an “ethnic minority”**

Indigenous people constitute just over 12% of Mexico’s population. Despite the impacts of migration and urbanisation on their contemporary patterns of settlement, they remain geographically concentrated in states towards the south of the country. This means that elsewhere, indigenous people are a tiny minority: for example, they are only 3.2% of the total population in Michoacán despite the fact that the state has a militant indigenous rights movement. Because of Mexico’s size, it still has the largest national indigenous population in Latin America, more than 13 million, but the question I want to pose with these figures is what they really tell us.

Let us assume that what makes people “indigenous” today is that they claim to belong to one of Mexico’s indigenous ethnic groups, i.e. that is the way they define themselves. This is not, of course, a totally valid assumption, since there are several ways in which the state is the arbiter of claims to indigenous identity, especially in matters of rights to communal land and various kinds of targeted social development programs. But it opens up the fundamental historical question. In 1600, most of the inhabitants of Mexican territory saw themselves and were seen by others as indigenous *naturales*. After the chaos of the early decades following the Conquest, the Spanish Crown had set about “protecting” them in order to have tribute-payers and a colonial labour force, once the initial demographic catastrophe induced by European diseases had passed. Enslavement of indigenous people was prohibited and the Crown abolished the *encomienda* system that had also contributed to the decimation of the native population of some regions because the Spaniards to whom the natives were

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<sup>7</sup> Van der Haar 2004.

“entrusted” grossly over-exploited them. This protection was achieved by creating judicially recognised “indigenous communities” with communal lands and a degree of autonomy in managing their own internal affairs. These colonial units of administration and exploitation became the principal point of reference for indigenous identities. People identified with their local community rather than more extensive ethnic groups.

But Mexico is geographically complex and each of its regions has its own history, which colonial systems of exploitation complicated even more as export markets came and went. Populations were moved and resettled by the Spanish, sometimes with catastrophic demographic consequences in the longer term. Indigenous people themselves sometimes abandoned their communities and migrated spontaneously, in search of a better life elsewhere, often in places previously only lightly occupied by mobile bands of hunter-gatherers who were displaced by the incomers. All that, coupled with the fact that most of the immigrants to New Spain were men, produced *mestizos*, people who abandoned an identity rooted in membership of an indigenous community. Becoming mestizo was principally a *cultural* process: anyone who spoke Spanish and dressed appropriately could cast off the status of *natural* and its tribute obligations once they left an official indigenous community.

Given that, we have to understand why people decided to retain indigenous identities and why they might have chosen to abandon them. The answers to that question are again a matter of particular local contexts, opportunities and costs, but one answer was that there was often a lot to be said for staying put, defending what had been saved from the Conquest, particularly land and resources, and living a life that allowed a certain autonomy in political and religious life at the community level, although this does not mean that indigenous communities were paradises of socio-economic equality or free from coercive and sometimes rigidly hierarchic forms of authority that some of their members, especially women, might find oppressive and stifling at times. What they offered was a kind of security and defence, but as historian Juan Pedro Viqueira is showing in his path-breaking demographic studies of Chiapas, both internal conflicts and the subordination of indigenous communities to non-indigenous landlords, including the monastic orders, could lead some families to opt for migratory strategies that fed the process of *mestizaje*.<sup>8</sup> We cannot assume that people who opted to abandon indigenous identities did so because they lacked the moral fibre to “resist colonial domination”, which is how the survival of the indigenous community is sometimes painted. Nevertheless, as the colonial era drew on indigenous communities did have quite a lot to resist if they wanted to survive, in particular attempts by neighbouring landed estates or growing non-indigenous communities to dispossess them of their lands and water. Again, the threats to the indigenous community varied immensely by region and micro-region, but national independence eventually brought a general challenge, as liberal reformers set about dismantling the legacy of the colonial order and embarked on the privatisation of communal lands. Some communities rose up in arms, rather more tried in vain to use the law to defend their rights, but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mexico had become a largely mestizo country because most of the former communities had been dispossessed of their arable lands, waters and forests, and the bulk of their inhabitants were turned into rural proletarians. This is the process that has generated the present geographical distribution of indigenous communities, and it was not reversed significantly by the Revolution and subsequent land reform.

Although some former indigenous communities recovered their lands or received grants of new lands, the post-revolutionary state did not want to conserve indigenous cultures and identities but to forge a new mestizo nation by promoting cultural assimilation. The liberal reform had abolished the legal personality of indigenous communities and even when the Agrarian Codes were finally modified, from 1940 onwards, to allow for the official

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<sup>8</sup> Viqueira 2002.

recognition of communal land rights again, members of the surviving indigenous communities held their rights to a share of communal lands and the right to speak as community members in assemblies as individuals whose names were entered on the rolls held by the state land reform ministries. Under these conditions, even more communities slowly abandoned their sense of indigenous identity.

But some communities hung in there tenaciously throughout this history and others reconstituted themselves, even on the basis of the state's new land reform regime. This is true, for example, of the Tojolabal communities of Chiapas, which are entirely a product of the land reform in the sense that the entire population had worked as landless peones on the *fincas* beforehand. The Tojolabales adapted the new state model of communal assemblies to their own purposes, running their internal affairs in an idiosyncratic manner by official standards because official standards were not rigorously enforced.<sup>9</sup> This is something that indigenous people had been doing since the arrival of the Spanish: institutions that were based on European models and imposed on native peoples, such as the religious confraternities, were appropriated and "indigenized" in ways that made them new forms with new purposes.<sup>10</sup> The Tojolabal case is also instructive in another way. Despite the fact that the population had been totally enclosed by the *fincas*, or more accurately perhaps *because* of that fact, there were region-wide links between Tojolabal groups, mediated by pilgrimages and other aspects of ceremonial life.<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, the Tojolabales were the first to try an experiment in regional autonomous government, a decade before the Zapatista rebellion. Where local community organisation had been stronger historically, as in the Central Highlands of Chiapas, community boundaries tended to be stronger too, and identities were at their most localised.

What we can infer from this is that distinctive cultural practices are central to the reproduction of indigenous identities, but subject to two important qualifications. Firstly, indigenous culture has evolved and changed historically, through a process of interaction with European culture that is best described as a two-way process of transculturation.<sup>12</sup> So although cultural politics often gravitates around a defence of "tradition" and customs of supposedly great antiquity, in reality, many of these traditions are quite modern. That point certainly extends to some of the institutions that are central to debates about *usos y costumbres* in community government, even if consensual modes of reaching decisions are long established in a more abstract sense. It also extends to institutions that anthropologists working in regions of Chiapas have traditionally painted as diagnostic of indigenous community organisation, in particular the *fiesta-cargo* systems in which individuals ascend a hierarchy of ranked offices by sponsoring increasingly expensive types of ceremonial activity.<sup>13</sup> It is now clear that these replaced collective confraternity systems as a result of economic changes brought about by liberal reforms and the growth of migrant labour systems linked to the development of capitalist agro-export systems under conditions of growing pressure on remaining village landholdings. Secondly, the defence of culture and the right to be "different" today, as in the past, is about defending and if possible improving one's place in society under conditions of accelerating social and economic change. That means that indigenous cultural politics involve increasing internal debate, including debate over religion, since Pentecostal churches are growing fast in some regions. But we need to understand these debates from the inside. For example, women in indigenous communities are less likely to accept exclusion from public decision-making but may adopt postures that seem odd to

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<sup>9</sup> Van der Haar 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Gruzinski 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Mattiace 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Gledhill 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Viqueira 2002.

Northern feminists. One “tradition” many women are anxious to end is their husbands having affairs and neglecting their families, which can lead them to demand stern forms of moral regulation that young unmarried people in turn find oppressive, especially when they are surrounded by young foreign NGO workers or tourists who seem to be having a lot more fun. So what counts as “good culture” to be preserved is constantly being challenged, but we can see that the rise of indigenous rights politics has already produced some important shifts. For example, where once people encouraged their children to speak Spanish and abandon their native tongue because this seemed the best way to escape being stigmatised as an ignorant *natural*, there is now a growing emphasis on preserving and modernising *la lengua*.

### **The development of indigenous movements**

Where do modern indigenous rights politics in Mexico come from? Part of the answer is clearly global and transnational, as I suggested at the beginning. But there is also a Mexican dimension, an unintended consequence of the assimilationist policies of the post-revolutionary state. That state trained bilingual schoolteachers to help foster its policies of “Mexicanizing the Indian” by fostering use of Spanish, encouraging hygiene, and inculcating other dimensions of “modernisation” in skills and attitudes. But this created a new kind of community elite that often violently displaced traditional authority figures in regions such as Chiapas.<sup>14</sup> At first the teachers were state-loyalists and aligned with the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and it is important to see that much of the history of indigenous activism in Mexico has been one of working through official institutional channels. But where the ambitions of these newly empowered indigenous political leaders were blocked by the domination of the regional scene by mestizos, they not surprisingly began to try to change this situation. Where they could not achieve this through militancy in the PRI and other official organisations, they turned to alternative organisations. Defections and conflicts accelerated in Chiapas through the 1980s because leaders who remained with the PRI had often converted themselves into local bosses who used their connections with the government not only to line their own pockets but to acquire a stranglehold over the remaining profitable sectors of a local economy under stress as the plantation system declined, agricultural crisis deepened, and no new sources of employment emerged.<sup>15</sup> The Chiapas elite proved too inflexible to bring these developments under control by making selective concessions to rival indigenous organisations and leaderships.

But although this set the stage for an irruption of indigenous mobilisation, the EZLN rebellion of 1994 was the product of very specific micro-regional conditions.<sup>16</sup> The epi-centre of the rebellion in the Selva Lacandona was a region of peasant colonisation, which mixed people from different ethnic groups and communities together and these were mostly people who had previously been landless workers on *fincas*. They did not come to the Selva bringing with them the cultural baggage of fiesta-cargo systems and rather closed political organisation of the Central Highlands, but created their own institutions by once again appropriating forms of peasant organisation that the national government had, ironically, designed to *reduce* peasant mobilisation. By democratising the official model of the union of *ejidos* or agrarian communities, the people who became the base of the EZLN created a region-wide organisation that was drawn into a collision course with the state for a variety of reasons. These included a lack of lands for the next generation following the government’s creation of a vast bioserve designed principally to foster external exploitation of the region’s resources, and a combination of exclusion from some of the state’s social programs

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<sup>14</sup> Nash 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Rus and Collier 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Leyva and Ascencio 1996.

with inclusion in some development programs that were peculiarly unsuited to the area's social and ecological characteristics, in particular extensive cattle breeding schemes which left large numbers of people in irretrievable debt after the neoliberal reforms of the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s.

There were two external influences in the development of the EZLN. One was the role of the Catholic dioceses under Bishop Ruiz, with its orientation to Liberation Theology and Indigenous empowerment: a new generation of indigenous catechists became a new generation of radical peasant leaders. The other is subcomandante Marcos and his group of urban guerrillas. But I think we should believe Marcos when he says that it was the indigenous movement that changed the outlooks of the outsiders and not the other way around.

### **The EZLN: an atypical model reshapes the national (and global) agenda**

To conclude, I want to discuss what the EZLN has and has not achieved over the past twelve years. One thing it has clearly achieved is a central symbolic place in the international anti-globalisation movement and the affection and active support of large numbers of foreign activists and NGOs. Very few of those supporters understand the complexities of Chiapas or know a great deal about the many other indigenous and peasant organisations that have played roles in its recent political history. But the external support has not only allowed the Zapatista movement to survive repression, it has supplied the resources that have underpinned its experiments in autonomous development. The EZLN has been able to decide which NGOs will operate in its territory and preserve a reasonable degree of control over the inner heartland of the rebellion. It has, however, lost much of what it gained after 1994. Even within the Selva itself many communities that initially supported the rebellion have either left the movement entirely or divided into rival factions, usually divided between the EZLN and groups identifying with the PRI or the centre-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). This situation reflects the way that the government has persuaded many families to take the benefits offered by its social development programs despite the EZLN's instructions to its supporters to reject all relations with "bad government". It also reflects the EZLN's consistent refusal to countenance an alliance with the PRD, which it continues to depict as another manifestation of a corrupt political system.

In these respects, the EZLN does seem to be locked in an impasse in Chiapas, and it is perhaps an impasse that characterises much of the rest of the indigenous movement. What kind of sustainable livelihoods can be created in the fragile ecological environment of the Selva, and are these kinds of livelihoods likely to be attractive to people who also have options of migration? Does it make a great deal of sense to build the utopia of indigenous autonomy on rural territories within a context of the slow decay of maize farming and a Mexican rural economy which continues to be fettered by its subordination within the global food system dominated by transnational corporations and reinforced by U.S. trade policies? But there are other perspectives. While the overall economy of Chiapas may be stagnating and even de-industrialising,<sup>17</sup> the zone contested by the Zapatistas is of enormous interest to a variety of transnational corporate interests: the Selva itself has oil and minerals, biodiversity and eco-tourist assets, and the southern frontier has become a site of potentially significant developments in the greenhouse cultivation of transgenic tomatoes and other kinds of high value produce, industries already supported by commercial forestry projects designed to produce wood for packaging. The new commercial agricultural investments have masses of cheap female labour to draw upon, and that is also potentially an asset that could be extended

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<sup>17</sup> Villafuerte 2001.

to new kinds of assembly and manufacturing production. The major problem is that there is still cheaper labour available south of the border.

In other words, the EZLN, like many other indigenous movements, is involved in a struggle over the shape and terms of development in Chiapas. Are we going to have an extractive economy, possibly combined with a sweatshop economy, that will suck profits out of the country, or is the population going to share more fully in the wealth generated in the region? From this perspective, the demand for territorial autonomy as control over resources that the Mexican government has never wished to concede takes on a quite different meaning: if extractive activities are to be allowed, can they be managed in an environmentally acceptable way and will the profits generated be shared by indigenous communities? What kinds of choices will people be allowed over their own futures?

This is an aspect of the EZLN program that resonates with many other indigenous movements that do not share other aspects of their philosophy, and it is also echoed in efforts to defend “patrimony” against forms of development that threaten to totally transform local social life. We know from experience that indigenous people north of the Rio Grande may think hosting casinos or nuclear waste dumps is an acceptable way of improving local living standards and creating jobs, but indigenous autonomy is about rights to manage as well as profit from “development”, and indigenous communities in Mexico have now accumulated a lot of bitter experience of what “development” may do from, for example, the repeated failure of PEMEX to prevent devastating ecological harm. The economic and social stakes in indigenous autonomy demands are therefore substantial.

But what of the political stakes? The EZLN’s international profile also reflects its model for grassroots direct democracy and implementation of the principle of “governing by obeying” (*mandar obedeciendo*).<sup>18</sup> Its most recent innovation, the “Good Government Councils”, is an attempt to break the mould of local government in Mexico: the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* are made up of representatives not only from local communities but also from different autonomous municipal governments, who are rotated in office very frequently to avoid corruption and the pursuit of personal ambitions. This extension of the principles of direct democracy to create a higher level of regional administration threatens to undermine the traditional bases of political control from above and traditions of boss rule. It offers access to “good government” that listens to what local people say to everyone who lives in a region, indigenous or not, pro-Zapatista or not. In embarking, on the 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising in January 2006, on another national tour christened “The Other Campaign”, subcomandante Marcos was striving to advance his organisation’s longstanding critique of the established political party system by inviting a new national debate on what democracy could mean in Mexico.

There are perhaps two ways to look at *La Otra Campaña* and the Sixth Lacandón Declaration on which it is based, the foundations for activities that have continued beyond the 2006 Presidential election campaign. One is that it is a new attempt to bring the indigenous movements into alliance with other kinds of social movements and forge a new national Left, something that the EZLN has tried in the past but failed to bring off for a variety of reasons, including the difficulties that urban working class Mexicans face in identifying with indigenous people from Chiapas. As Matthew Gutmann (2002) has pointed out, the fact that people who see themselves as “different”, see their problems as “different”, and advocate different strategies for solving them, does not mean that they cannot have debates about politics and social justice that slowly transform attitudes and in subtle ways might reshape Mexican political culture. In a sense, the utterly pluralistic, “let us respect difference”, posture of *La Otra Campaña* clearly seeks to tap the rich vein of what Gutmann calls the

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<sup>18</sup> Harvey 1998.

“compliant defiance” that permeates much grassroots sentiment in Mexico. Marcos is listening to people who have different kinds of grievances, but all connected in some way with the existing political system and the impacts of neoliberal capitalism. This, however, brings me to a second perspective, because *La Otra Campaña* is very specifically framed around the idea of building a new Left capable of waging a more effective anti-capitalist struggle. For Marcos the PRD is an enemy not simply because it embodies the systemic corruption of the political system but because it is a neoliberalised social democratic party incapable of confronting global capitalism in any meaningful way. Indigenous rights and autonomy have not disappeared from this discourse, but do seem to be downplayed. So perhaps this new move is the recognition of another impasse, an attempt to break out of the movement’s imprisonment both within the terms of the indigenous rights debate and within a comparatively small region of Chiapas.

Advance on the indigenous autonomy front is now bogged down in what generally seem vain efforts to get better legislation from state governments than the indigenous movement obtained from the federal Congress in 2001. The social and economic destiny of Zapatista territory is controlled by far larger national forces and cannot be changed significantly simply by sustaining a local semi-subsistence economy which younger people are very likely to abandon by voting with their feet. The wider political impact of *La Otra Campaña* remains to be seen. It continues the EZLN’s longstanding insistence that no one is seeking power or political office and it remains a kind of utopian experiment aimed at seeing what can be built by recreating a dialogue between different kinds of dissident movements and voices in Mexico. But this may be exactly what indigenous politics itself needs if it is to move forward.

One of the problems with indigenous rights politics, as its critics point out, is that it asks that different kinds of citizens have different legally recognised rights. It is not clear that this is fair, particularly if possessing an indigenous identity gives a poor person advantages that an equally poor mestizo cannot claim. This is, in fact, another way of thinking about why indigenous identity politics have flourished in a neoliberal world: by playing on transnational sympathies, post-colonial guilt and romantic images of “ethnic others”, indigenous people may be able to negotiate concessions from the state that other poor citizens cannot obtain, and tap into the special funding available from the multilateral agencies, which extend from targeted social development funds to money assigned to purchase lands to create communal territories. Fairness is certainly an issue, and it should be said that where indigenous groups have gained a legal edge in conflicts with non-indigenous neighbours recently, the results have not always been attractive: however understandable in terms of past histories of discrimination, the eviction of some comparatively poor mestizo peasants from their lands has not always seemed the best way of correcting past mistakes. Today’s mestizo peasant victims were often manipulated by more powerful regional actors in the past: the latter now tend to be long gone and enjoying upper class lifestyles in urban centres.

There is also the danger, again stressed by Juan Pedro Viqueira in the Chiapas context, of creating what are in effect “reservations” in which indigenous people will continue to be exploited as low-cost producers and cheap labour by the social classes that control the commanding heights of the larger economy, thereby reproducing what is, in effect, a colonial structure of exploitation now dominated by transnational corporations and their Mexican business associates. Another problem is the emphasis on *usos y costumbres*. As examples of the vices that might be perpetuated as a result of letting “communities” do things in their own way, critics often point to the continuing exclusion of women from some community assemblies and indigenous forms of justice that do not respect the rules of evidence, involve inhuman and degrading forms of punishment, or involve unreasonable sanctions against property and persons because the accused and their families are expelled in

the interests of “harmony”. Appeals to “traditions” that do not stand up to historical scrutiny are sometimes used to disqualify political opponents for threatening community moral integrity, and to bolster the position of dominant factions that are not governing in a way that protects the interests of minorities, such as members of non-Catholic religious groups.<sup>19</sup> Other critics point to the way that indigenous identity politics sometimes bolsters ethnic essentialisms that can even divide the indigenous rights movement itself, let alone prevent broader alliances to confront common problems in contemporary rural or urban life. It is quite common, in Oaxaca and elsewhere, for one community to adopt the racialized language of dominant non-indigenous groups to assert its difference and superiority over neighbours of another ethnicity. I found tendencies towards this kind of fragmentation between neighbouring Nahuatl communities in Michoacán, since they emphasised differences of origin and “race”.<sup>20</sup>

Yet I suggest that whatever else might be questionable in the EZLN strategy, it is none of the above. The EZLN does not exclude mestizos or foster ethnic essentialism: how could it, since it is a movement founded on ethnic mixing and the creation of a new regional peasant culture? In this respect, it belongs to a family of Mexican rural movements, such as the *Unión de Comuneros “Emiliano Zapata”* in Michoacán, founded by the self-taught agrarian lawyer Efrén Capiz who sadly died last year, which have tried to deconstruct the official model of a mestizo nation that deprecates living Indians by encouraging mestizos to remember their own historical ties to indigenous Mexico.<sup>21</sup> The EZLN sometimes uses the language of *usos y costumbres*, but it has been at the forefront of efforts to transform the position of women in indigenous communities, and urged its supporters to recognise the values enshrined in global human rights discourses – in both cases often at the cost of friction amongst its base. Although it found itself trapped into the logic of trying to build an autonomous economy in a limited regional space, its aim is clearly not to create reservations but to transform the entire economic system by combining with other movements and social sectors. This may remain a utopia but it is necessary to ask what the alternatives might be. At the moment they might be: dying of chemical poisoning working in a plastic tent growing transgenic tomatoes; working for an infra-subsistence wage in a local plant that enables Wal-Mart to supply goods at prices even the worst paid U.S. workers can afford; or trying to avoid being shot by the border patrol or dying of dehydration in the desert so as to become one of the super-vulnerable undocumented workers that Haliburton’s subsidiary, Kellogg, Brown and Root, decides not to pay for their contribution to the clean-up and eventual ethnic cleansing through redevelopment of New Orleans. Against that potential race to the bottom, indigenous movements seem to have a lot going for them.

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<sup>19</sup> Santín del Río 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Gledhill 2004.

<sup>21</sup> See also Stephen 1997.

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