

Insurgent Mexico!

Redefining Revolution & Progress for the 21st Century

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“The political status quo in Mexico died on January 1. Every Mexican institution is now in a state of crisis.”

—*El Financiero* (Mexican business newspaper)

“If 53 people died in the riots in the Dominican Republic, 53,000 people could die if the Mexicans remember that they are a people with a history of rebellion. If that happens, capitalism in Latin America will go to the devil!”

—Venezuelan bank official after anti-austerity riots in the Dominican Republic in the early 1980s

“The comrades say we have been at this for five hundred years. We can wait another five hundred years.”

—Subcomandante Marcos, of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN), when asked how long his movement would continue to fight.

Subcomandante Marcos' declaration of patience aside, the rebellion in southern Mexico begun earlier this year and its aftermath promise dramatic social and political upheaval in the enormous “Indian Republic” to our south—events which will not be measured in centuries, but in the next few years.

The mostly poorly-armed insurgents took over five towns, destroyed government buildings and police stations, burned land titles and government records, and liberated prisons and jails, among other feats, before returning to obscure villages and the jungle mist.

Yet, as the charismatic, articulate Marcos, whose writings have made him a national sensation, told the press, “We did not go to war on January 1 to kill or to have them kill us. We went to make ourselves heard.” The strategy worked. The dire conditions of the eight million Mexican Indians, and the tenuous condition of the six-decade-long social truce in that country since the consolidation of power by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1929, became common knowledge within days.

Following the revolt came massive military repression involving up to a third of the Mexican army (17,000 troops), with indiscriminate machine-gunning and bombing of villages and vehicles travelling along roads, torture, summary executions, and mass graves. More than five hundred people were killed. Mayan campesinos fleeing from Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas into Guatemala to escape the violence have been prevented from returning, and Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas have been accused of instigating the revolt, and harassed and intimidated by the Mexican army. Private guardias blancas (“white guards”), private armies of the rich landowners long responsible for violence in the region, have been mobilizing for further attacks against peasant, labor and human rights workers. (According to human rights groups, some 500 people were disappeared in Chiapas during the 1980s.) Violent clashes over land continue, even since a peace accord was signed between the zapatistas and the government at the beginning of March. Whatever the agreement turns out to be, the war in southern Mexico is far from over.

Undogmatic Revolutionaries

In contrast with other guerrilla groups in Latin America, the zapatistas, despite their trappings and tactics, do not present guerrilla war as the only legitimate strategy for social transformation or aim to seize power. Rather, their message is that determination, creativity, daring and flexibility—in their case tactics and a point of view flexible enough to get them labeled “post-modern” revolutionaries by *The New York Times*—can still be effective in resisting oppression and opening new pathways to radical social change.

After a period of defeat and paralysis for workers, native peoples, and popular reform movements suffering under the New World Order, this was an important message for many to hear. And it was heard. In mid-January 150,000 people demonstrating in Mexico City chanted “E-Z-L-N” (the Spanish initials of the zapatista movement), and striking workers and angry native and peasant organizations rapidly raised the banner of zapatismo as their own.

Native peoples throughout the Americas from Argentina to Quebec also took notice and expressed support for the Mayan rebellion. Workers demonstrating in Spain and Italy chanted “VIVA ZAPATA,” and in Northern California, an area already feeling the effects of corporate “free trade” plunder, Anglo and Latino high school students took on a school administration that tried to prevent them from wearing red and black bandannas in solidarity with the Mexican revolutionaries.

The Chiapas revolt emerged not from the handful of leftist intellectuals that apparently helped shape it, but from the most oppressed depths of Mexican society—poor Indians who have been continuously and steadily dispossessed of their meager lands by cattle ranchers and big hacendados (landowners), while seeing the rainforest, which sustained and sheltered them in myriad ways for countless generations, demolished by big logging interests and small poachers alike. In the last few decades, two-thirds of the Lacandon rainforest (one of the most biologically diverse areas in the country) has been logged. Campesinos who were persuaded by government economists to settle in former rainforest areas to grow coffee and bananas for the market saw their livelihoods decline as the thin rainforest soil became depleted. When world coffee prices plummeted in the 1980s many lost their land altogether to the cattle barons as their money ran out.

Growing coffee and other cash crops, rather than the corn and beans that fed them for millennia, was one of many brilliant ideas dreamed up by the Yale- and Harvard-trained PRI bureaucrats who manage the country from the helm of their decrepit one-party “democratic” dictatorship. Current Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the quintessential necktie, was instrumental in gutting Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which guaranteed land for all Mexicans and protected communal lands from sale. This set in motion the privatization and liquidation of the traditional communally-owned ejido farmlands (some with Prehispanic roots and others created after the 1910 Revolution), with wealthy land interests and entrepreneurial pirates practicing “hostile takeovers” on the holdings of Mexico’s ten million small farmers.

Of course, the ejido system was frequently corrupt and dominated by party hacks and small-time bosses (caciques). Such lands can be poor and are increasingly inadequate; as historian John Womack has remarked, “an ejido parcel is a ticket to misery.” (1) Nevertheless, before the recent changes, they were at least formally intact in most places; besides being symbolically important to Mexican campesinos, they were often the only thing keeping many, including entire native ethnic groups, from becoming completely landless.

Revolt after Revolt

Land reforms achieved by the 1910 Revolution barely affected the southernmost state. Chiapas remains a starkly divided, two-tiered society that continues to experience misery and peonage reminiscent of early colonial times. While some communal properties still exist, half of all people owning land live on only one percent of it. Huge tracts of land are controlled by rich hacendados and cattle ranchers, defended by private armed gangs, the police and army, and the local political apparatus, while the million or so Indians in the state live under horribly abject conditions.

Even though Chiapas produces immense amounts of energy, raw materials and profits for Mexican elites and the international market, its people, especially the Indians, are among the worst off in the country. More than half of the population is malnourished, a figure which approaches eighty percent in the Mayan villages of the highland forests. Some 15,000 people a year die of easily curable diseases—the main killer being malnutrition. (2)

But the people of Chiapas have not passively accepted their misery; the area has been the site of recurrent rebellion. As a political organizer who was previously shot and forced to flee the state told the *Times*, “Now you see guerrillas. But there has never been peace in Chiapas.”

The Indians are not the pawns of leftist agitators, as the government charged. As one anthropologist who has worked among them for two decades remarked, “Unlike the guerrillas in Guatemala, [the insurgents] are not seeking out bases for support among the campesinos, but coming up from them.” The zapatista revolt comes from a long Mayan tradition—not only the revolts that must have contributed to the demise of what was likely an increasingly authoritarian, bureaucratic and enfeebled Mayan empire in the ninth century C.E., and against the Toltec conquerors from central Mexico somewhat later, but also against the Spanish conquistadores throughout the colonial epoch. The Mayans impeded Spanish domination for several decades after contact; as Michael Coe writes in *The Maya* (1975), their resistance to Spanish colonization was effective for a long period of time precisely because, “unlike the mighty Aztec, there was no over-all native authority which could be toppled, bringing an empire with it. Nor did the Maya fight in the accepted fashion...they were jungle guerrillas in a familiar modern tradition...”

Even after the Spanish established their power, the Mayan peoples continued to fight. “Revolt after revolt continued to plague the Spaniards throughout the sixteenth century,” remarks Coe. The Yucatec Mayans rose again in rebellion in 1847 and 1860, and in 1910 the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship was still suppressing an ongoing uprising in Quintana Roo, at the eastern end of the Yucatan peninsula. There were rebellions among the highland Maya of Chiapas throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which became the themes of the famous jungle novels of the anarchist novelist B. Traven. The Mayan Tzeltal rose in 1712 and 1868; on January 1, when the EZLN took San Cristobal de las Casas, named for the sixteenth century defender of the Indians, they burned the municipal archives, financial records and land titles, but on the urging of the archives director, decided to protect the historical archives, with its rich record of the Tzeltal revolts.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s there were uprisings, land seizures, strikes and protests in Chiapas, with brutal, repressive reactions from the state government and army. (One of the worst perpetrators of violence against campesinos and Indians was General Absalon Castellanos, who later became state governor. Castellanos, now a wealthy landowner, was captured by the guerrillas and released during the recent uprising.) In December, 1991, three hundred indigenous people organized a sit-in in the plaza at Palenque (both a small town and the nearby important archeological site) to protest conditions on the 500th anniversary of the European invasion of America, including lack of drinking water, dispossession of their lands, and the encroachment of tourist industries. The demonstration was viciously suppressed, and many people were arrested and tortured. Three months later, three hundred people marched from Palenque to Mexico City to demand redress from the federal government, and were all but ignored.

While the modern Mexican state’s official ideology of Mesoamerican indigenismo, with its celebration of native roots, left impressive examples in art and architecture, it remained mostly a sentimental, nationalist glorification of ancient Mesoamerican empires. Racism against the Indian endured, and real native communities languished, their lands despoiled in the name of national development and progress, while propertied classes and the political bureaucracy benefited. Thus, indigenismo has served mostly to conceal the reality of an unending conquest and plunder of native lands and peoples. This war goes back to the European conquest and to the seventeenth century encomienda system, which destroyed native towns and villages and allocated their lands to the invaders, parceling out Indian laborers to mines and haciendas (estates).

In fact, the Mexican state carried out the same war of extermination against tribal and indigenous peoples that occurred in the United States, Argentina, Russia and Australia, a war which continued into the twentieth century against both large indigenous population centers and smaller groups, settled and nomadic. Though the vast majority of Mexicans are mestizo (mixed European and native, with African ancestry in a small number of cases), it did not prevent them from carrying out the military annihilation of nomadic groups like the Apaches and Comanches in the nineteenth century. When in the 1890s the settled, more populous Yaquis rebelled against

Mexican incursions into and seizures of their lands in northwest Mexico, their resistance was cruelly suppressed, much of their land confiscated, and at least 8,000 of them shipped to the Yucatan to be sold as slaves to wealthy planters—a condition of abysmal peonage already experienced by large groups like the Mayans, Zapotecs, and others.

“Now the whites respect the Indians, because they come with guns in hand,” Subcomandante Marcos told the press in an interview that has now become famous. Yet political commentators in Mexico have noted that Marcos, the most prominent spokesman of the indigenous movement, is not himself an Indian. For the Mayan people he represents, this may have useful aspects. Fluent in Mexican popular and media cultures, an intellectual with a sophisticated understanding of Mexican politics and history, Marcos is a very effective transmitter of the movement’s intentions and point of view, probably in a way that most Indians could not be. He also appears modest about his role.

Nevertheless, such a situation has its dangers, as the media-generated cult around him has demonstrated. The Indians may find it useful to have a spokesman adept at manipulating the signs of post-modern Mexico, who can utilize Mexican historical symbols, contemporary politics, and television humor and soap opera sensibilities simultaneously to get his message across to a population saturated in media discourse. This doesn’t prevent mass society’s media from manipulating Marcos and his *compatriotas* for its own purposes. Newspapers printed surveys on his sex appeal, and the figure of Marcos in his ski-mask quickly became a national pop culture fad printed on tee-shirts and buttons, turned into dolls and even marketed on condom packages. When a reporter presented one of the condoms to another leader of the rebels, Juan, the Indian man said, “We rose up in arms precisely because for many years, since the time of our grandfathers, we have not been respected. What most hurts us—and we want to show it—is that bad people have taken from our dead, from their blood, as though it was merchandise.” (*New York Times*, February 2, 1994.)

Juan didn’t understand that capital functions in exactly such a way—spectacularizing even a revolution that intends to destroy it. By fetishizing Marcos, the media perpetuated the system that has rendered the Indian invisible, and perhaps worked to marginalize the rebellion by trivializing it. Though Marcos told the press the *zapatistas* didn’t revolt merely to get into the newspapers but to fight for their lives, their relationship with the media has been ambivalent. Certainly, much of their impact has been dependent on it. The *zapatistas*’ manipulation of the media may be one desperate measure among many, by a people in a desperate situation. And so far, it has been successful. But one wonders what would happen to their movement, for example—which Marcos has called “not Chiapan, but national”—if the media, under government pressure, say, decided to ignore them? And, as the figure of Marcos looms ever larger, what becomes of the anonymous rebels he represents? How irreplaceable is he—what happens to the movement as a whole if he is captured or killed? (3)

Marcos’ eloquence is impressive, but it, too, is partly a function of media presentation, and tends to mask while simultaneously revealing the reality within the native communities he claims to represent. It is clear there is great solidarity among the rebels, and that they have deep roots, but the identity of the EZLN and their actual relationship to the Mayan community as a whole are not so clear. Marcos himself may be an example of the exemplary non-Indian, using his experience in the dominant culture and his political skills to aid native peoples in their autonomous uprising. But his problematic role may result in another kind of colonization, indirectly, by the culture presently in the late phases of eclipsing the indigenous world, as the revolt and its goals are shaped by the kinds of consultation this leftist intellectual provides. Support for the basic justness of the revolt should not obscure the recognition, culled from historical experience, that revolutionary goals and their practical unfolding can bring about new forms of unanticipated domination. -As mass movements in Latin America have suggested (for example, in the Andean region), indigenism, like other modern political movements, is a two-edged sword. (4)

Land and Liberty

Another nationalist slogan—and the single most important battle cry of the 1910 Revolution—was “Land and Liberty,” but these principles, too, were undermined by the failure to transform social relations fundamentally, including abolishing capitalist property relations. From 1910 until 1945 nearly 76 million acres of land were distributed

to small farmers and to both traditional and newly established ejidos. But not only was much of the land poor, the campesinos still faced class society and the market system.

In his classic study of Mesoamerica, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (1959), Eric Wolfe writes, “Land reform solved no economic problem; nor did the archives of the Indianist contain a road map to guide the society...” While sectors of the former elites were broken and many of the peons freed by land reform, the new dispensation “created new sources of power in the countryside. For in the very act of distributing land to the landless, the agents of the land reform became the new power-holders in the rural area...[which] laid the foundations of a new political machine to replace the one overturned by the revolution.” This machine was the post-revolutionary, bureaucratic party-state, against which the contemporary zapatistas, wrapping themselves in the mantle of the most profound and liberatory manifestation of the 1910 Revolution, have taken up arms.

Mexico’s revolution was the first of the century to overthrow the old order. Like the Soviet Union, the state in Mexico initiated the classic nationalist project of political consolidation, modernization and economic development from a position of relative weakness in a world of powerful, imperial rivals. Unlike the state socialists of the East, the Mexican state chose the path of a mixed economy with massive foreign investment, thus guaranteeing its rapid subservience to the imperialist colossus to its north.

The PRI was not, however, an ideological party like the Eastern varieties that came to power after years of ideological struggle. The Mexican hierarchic pyramid that scrambled to power after a socially devastating civil war was based almost solely on expediency, greed, and the bureaucratic manipulation of a populist base through a patronage system in trade unions, party organizations and the police. While the Eastern statistes were ideologues with a mafia who evolved into a mafia with an ideology, the Mesoamericans were never much more than a mafia with a few nationalist trappings. The PRI is now loved about as much as the Eastern European parties were before they were toppled at the end of the 1980s, and is apparently even less feared than it once was. It has managed to stay afloat through a combination of petty reforms and repression, by dismantling and privatizing some economic remnants of nationalist party-state monopolies like oil and communications, and by throwing open the gates to deeper penetration by transnational corporations.

Ironically, the PRI now finds itself in a position like that of the Mexican state at the twilight of the regime of dictator Porfirio Diaz—the period of the “Porfiriato” before the 1910 Revolution. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw economic (though not much industrial) development, huge foreign investment and the rise of a small, urban middle class. The political elites—called “científicos” for their ideology of- economic liberalism, scientific progress, and technological development—were intent on creating a modern, westernized, industrial-capitalist nation-state and economy. Foreign investment, in the view of these elites trained in European and U.S. universities, would develop Mexico until local capital could stand on its own legs. Economic benefits would eventually trickle down, but until Mexico was fully developed, amenities such as justice, political freedom and social expenditures would have to wait.

By the turn of the century, half of the territory of Mexico belonged to a few thousand families and foreigners. According to historian T.H. Fehrenbach, during the sugar boom of the 1890s, some 32 families “came to own virtually all the croplands in Morelos,” the state which produced the agrarian revolution later dubbed zapatismo. “Villages were deprived of wells and water rights and common fields, and cane was planted in some village squares. Protests, which were often violent, were squelched by the hard-riding *rurales* [rural cops] at the beck and call of the local chief politicians.” (See *Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico*, 1973.)

Approximately a million families were driven from the land “and reduced to vagabondage and peonage” by the new economic developments, writes Fehrenbach. “Only three percent of rural families owned any farmland.” The standard week’s wage was the same as at the beginning of the century, but purchased about one fourth the amount of corn. The society was immiserated, overworked, hungry, ill, and desperate. The científicos and the wealthy investors and landowners they served did not see how the human disaster they were creating on the land was setting the stage for the convulsions to come. By the time Emiliano Zapata and his compatriots rose in Morelos in 1910 and the political system began to unravel, it was too late, and the científicos were swept away.

Two Mexicos

This scenario closely resembles the increasing destitution in contemporary Mexico. Today as then, one finds the same rationale for development, and essentially the same wretched conditions for its victims. Industrialization, modernization and more elaborate communications with the rest of the world—all of which were dreams of científicos and many revolutionaries as well—have done little to better the life of the Indian, the campesino, or the poor worker. Instead, poverty has been modernized, petrochemicalized, and mediatized, but people are still as landless, hungry and desperate as they ever were.

Mexico began its industrialization in earnest after the revolutionary wave subsided, and the PRI was firmly entrenched during World War II. The influence of the United States and the emergence of a new capitalist class were key to the shape of modern Mexican society. Industrialization and modernization emulated the “American way of life” to the north in Gringolandia. At the end of the 1950s, Wolfe commented that while the Mexican economy had experienced “a phenomenal rate of growth, real wages [had] increased but slightly since 1910.” This heavy exploitation of the emerging working class allowed the Mexican state and capitalists to subsidize industrialization. They managed to fend off discontent not so much through revolutionary nationalist rhetoric as through the dissemination of a few consumerist crumbs among those sectors necessary for development.

“The small increase in wages has not gone into a better diet or into better housing,” Wolfe explained. “It has gone into the acquisition of the cheap and expendable items of North American culture. Not everyone can participate in their consumption; but their ‘demonstration effect’ makes ‘pie in the sky’ seem increasingly available in the here and now, thus masking the hidden exploitation of the industrial labor force.” Much of Mexico’s industrialization, in fact, went to produce cheap consumer goods for domestic consumption. That, combined with a growing urban society and a narrow but significant middle class with increased buying power helped to bring about “two Mexicos,” a dramatically two-tiered society with a westernized, consumer society resting on the backs of the impoverished, distressed campesinos, Indians, and unemployed and underemployed slum dwellers in the rapidly growing cities.

This, of course, is a picture of much of the so-called “underdeveloped world” (and increasingly of the industrialized North). By the late 1970s more people were landless in Mexico than in 1910. As in the U.S., the decade of the 1980s was a period of massive financial looting and accelerated capital accumulation at the expense of the society as a whole, bringing into being a westernized middle class sold on television, white bread and other imported commodities and habits, and even a handful of billionaires, while simultaneously causing increased penury and desperation for workers and los agachados, the have-nots of the lower depths.

In fact, it was partly a recognition of this process that fueled the current zapatista revolt. As the vicar of San Cristobal’s Catholic archdiocese, Gonzalo Ituarte, told *The New York Times*, the rage of the poor was not so much that they had grown poorer (though they had), but that roads and radio and television had made it so much easier for them to see how they were being left behind by the more privileged. Correspondingly, point 11 of the EZLN demands brought to the peace negotiations with the government demanded construction of housing in all of Mexico’s rural communities, electricity, roads, potable water, and the like, but also insisted on “the advantages of the city like television, stoves, refrigerators, washing machines, etc.” Rising expectations, generated by television and consumer society, confronting a reality in which conditions are not even adequate to survive, created an explosion whose reverberations continue to be felt. The consumerist ideology that once contributed to social peace for several decades has now become a component in the social war.

Political Economy of Cholera

Mexico is deep in debt, like the rest of Latin America (and much of the rest of the world, for that matter). After a borrowing frenzy in the 1970s for massive industrial development projects, Latin American nation states found themselves heavily in debt to international capital. Throughout the 1980s, they steadily lowered the living conditions of their populations through harsh austerity measures to meet International Monetary Fund demands. A drop in world oil prices and in the prices of other key products, combined with rising interest rates, conspired

nevertheless to keep them behind, no matter how much profit they could wring from their people and lands—a scenario evocative of the indebted peon at the company store.

By the end of the 1980s, millions of people were homeless, hungry, and succumbing to disease in a situation one political observer described as the “political economy of cholera.” Juan de Dias Parra, of the Latin American Association for Human Rights, recently summarized the consequences at a meeting in Quito, Ecuador, noting that “in Latin America today, there are seventy million more hungry, thirty million more illiterates, ten million more families without homes and forty million more unemployed persons than there were twenty years ago...There are 240 million human beings who lack the necessities of life, and this when the region is richer and more stable than ever, according to the way the world sees it.”

Mexico is no exception. In the last decade, the buying power of the Mexican wage worker has diminished more than 60 percent, and in comparable terms, Mexican factory pay is less than in Haiti. Living conditions consistently and dramatically eroded through the 1980s for all sectors but the upper and middle classes. This situation was underscored by Subcomandante Marcos when he declared, “We have the opportunity to die fighting and not of dysentery, which is how the Indians of Chiapas normally die.” Capital, on the other hand, has been very optimistic; in the last year alone foreign investment on the Mexican stock exchange nearly doubled to over \$72 billion (a figure which dropped precipitously after the Zapatista New Year’s party, climbing once more when the army moved in).

But another whirlwind is appearing on the horizon. Two “detonators,” as Marcos put it, set off the explosion in January: electoral fraud (a continuous, especially brazen phenomenon in Chiapas, but also a notorious national scandal during the 1988 presidential elections), and the North American Free Trade Agreement, which threatens to drive three million more people from the land through consolidation of cash crop agribusiness and the importation of cheap American agricultural products. In both motives, today’s zapatistas resemble their agrarista precursors.

It is understandable that radicals would take up the figure of Emiliano Zapata, a spontaneous, incorruptible rebel and natural man of the people, a revolutionary deeply rooted in the organic traditions of indigenous community. Zapata’s movement had goals parallel to the EZLN’s—a struggle against anti-democratic electoral fraud and a demand for electoral reform on the one hand, and for autonomous control of the land on the other. The latest rebellion was also, like the first (in the words of an unfriendly observer in Zapata’s state of Morelos just prior to the 1910 revolution), “a real war of the sandal against the shoe, of work pants against trousers...” The movement, according to John Womack’s excellent history, was populist and unofficial, enjoying “extraordinary political solidarity.” Isolation and poverty had worked to keep Zapata’s agraristas focused and principled, though provincial. But, as Womack observes, its “insistent provincialism was the movement’s strength and its weakness.” (See Zapata and the Mexican Revolution, 1968.)

While the Morelos revolution created egalitarian autonomy in that state, its far-reaching and visionary local activities tended to combine with a limited, reformist outlook nationally. Zapata’s Plan de Ayala called for “Reform, Liberty, Justice, and Law,” demanded electoral reform, but failed to challenge the national capitalist state and class, focusing instead on local problems and narrowly on the hated big landowners. Zapata was not able to, nor was he interested in making long-term programmatic alliances with other revolutionary armies. After marching into the capital, his army simply withdrew. In 1915, the *Manifiesto to the Nation*, probably written by Zapata’s anarchist advisor Antonio Diaz Soto y Gama, called for “War to the death against the hacendados, ample guarantees for all the other classes of society.” A thoroughgoing revolution in one southern region resulted in half a revolution on the larger landscape. In keeping with Danton’s dictum that the makers of half-revolutions only dig their own graves, the agraristas ended in martyrdom and defeat, becoming the objects of national devotion once they were safely dead.

Today’s zapatistas have qualities that may also be simultaneous strengths and weaknesses. They also have basic demands: land, respect, political freedom, and to be left alone. Much of their revolt is an expression of sheer outrage and protest, a declaration, in their words, that, “Enough Is Enough.” Interestingly, they claim they are “not marxists or maoists,” and do not want to take state power (though their intention, according to their December 31 “Declaration of War,” is to “advance to the capital, overcoming the Mexican federal army”). They desire instead simply “to govern themselves within the borders of their own communities.” Though they endorse some kind of socialism, it is distinct from the kind they have labeled “dinosauric.”

No Room to Move

Yet the contemporary zapatistas, too, seem bent on making half a revolution. They state they “only want a democratically elected government and respect for the [indigenous] ethnic groups,” and ask “that other powers of the nation advocate to restore the legitimacy and the stability of the nation by overthrowing the dictator [Salinas de Gortari], the maximum and illegitimate federal executive that today holds power.” They want a “transition government and new elections,” and write in patriotic terms about the Mexican flag and nation.

In the late 1920s, the PRI consolidated power from the vacuum that ensued after the exhaustion of the revolutionary movement and the mutual fratricide of workers and peasants on opposite sides of barricades created by rival caudillos. Now that the PRI appears at the end of its rope, ready to dangle at the end of someone else’s, the call for democracy and elections may also lead to a new capitalist state formation. This could be dominated by a reformed wing of the PRI (led perhaps by peace negotiator Manuel Camacho Solis, whom Marcos has claimed the EZLN would favor). Another possible competitor for power is the left-liberal loyal opposition, the Revolutionary Democratic Party (led by ex-PRI member Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, the son of the popular nationalist PRI president of the 1930s, who was robbed of electoral victory in the 1988 elections, and who deplored the uprising while making use of it as a platform to attack the ruling clique).

In any event, the zapatistas may have set off a series of events that, by throwing the PRI into some disarray, could help to usher in a new, “democratic” reform government promising to alter the terms of NAFTA, and to grant some social reforms, while maintaining a variant of the current power structure, the army, and capitalist social relations. (5) Already, in the agreement signed in March between the EZLN and the government, federal negotiators promised to double the pace of rural electrification, increase investment in housing and other basic services, and bolster investment in the moribund coffee economy. The pact promises job training programs, creation of new industries, and other such pork barrel reforms like federal support for Mexican products harmed by foreign competition (which would seem to be a violation of NAFTA). These neoliberal promises hardly sound like radical social transformation.

But no capitalist state in Latin America has much room to move within the confines of the current world economic situation. They cannot turn back a “free trade” agreement with the gringos without dire repercussions; this is not a deal of equals, but of master and vassal. More importantly, they cannot grant profound reforms, providing not only potable water but ambitious infrastructure development, even televisions, washing machines, and the “etcetera” that stands for all the inchoate desires of the poor at the margins of consumer society. They cannot do so because they are in debt up to their ears, because the only way to get money within the international capitalist economy is to do what they are presently doing, selling the country lock, stock and barrel to the transnationals, and most of all because they cannot maintain their privilege, wealth and power and share the “etcetera” with the pelados (the “peeled ones,” the wretched of the earth), who are too numerous.

The Mexican state is caught between an irresistible force and an immovable object; no one can know what is to come, except widening social conflict. “Is ours the last Central American guerrilla war,” asked Mexican political writer Gustavo Esteva in the independent liberal Mexican magazine *Proceso* in February, “or has the new postmodern revolutionary era begun?” (6) There is no way to answer this question before the fact. Mexican novelist Paco Ignacio Taibo II writes, “Are we nearing the end of the oldest dictatorship in the world?...For now we’re walking on shadows, disturbed and filled with hope.” A new kind of rising expectation seems to be sealing the fate of official Mexican society. But what is coming?

That depends partly on the zapatistas, the voiceless ones for whom they presently speak, and the rest of society that was stunned and then cheered by the communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos. The desires of the campesinos of Mexico are unclear. Hopefully, they will not be deceived by the same mirage of development that allowed the PRI to create the “post-modern” social and ecological catastrophe that is now Mexico, and in fact the entire industrialized and semi-industrialized world. Such an approach would be undogmatic, to say the least; it might mean taking seriously poet Octavio Paz’s comment in *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid*, that the paradise promised by progress and development “is not of this world [but] in...a future that is impalpable, unreachable, perpetual. Progress has peopled history with the marvels and monsters of technology but it has depopulated the life of man. It has given us more things but not more being.” (7)

A Way Out

Determining the character of twenty-first century “post-modernity” has now become the central problem of finding our way out of the contemporary nightmare of industrial capitalism. As Ivan Illich has observed, “For the first time, needs have almost exclusively become coterminous with commodities.” First World capitalist states, Second World state-socialist dictatorships, and Third World mixed-economy neo-colonies have all been driven by the same motive. As Illich puts it, “the progressive substitution of industrial goods and services for useful but nonmarketable values has been the shared goal of political factions and regimes otherwise violently opposed to one another.” But the development of instrumental-commodity values exacts its own cost on culture and on human autonomy. “Beyond a certain threshold, the multiplication of commodities induces impotence, the incapacity to grow food, to sing, or to build.”

Or to resist. The televisions the zapatistas demand, fixtures of that urban-industrial “etcetera” presently invading not only their psyches but everyone’s on the planet, are part of a global process. It is the same international commodification of life, now accelerated by treaties like NAFTA and GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), that they already recognized as a death sentence on their bodies and souls. Their culture, and other vernacular cultures like theirs, have managed to survive and endure centuries of exploitation and oppression precisely because of their native traditions and their direct relationship to the reproduction of their culture and their subsistence. It is such self-reliance that urban-industrial values explode, so that ultimately it may not be helicopter gunships that subdue them, but their own victory, and the Mexico City soap operas, news and commercials that will consequently be delivered to them.

For the poorest people on earth who to some degree still live in vernacular societies—societies which, despite conflicts and injustices, continue to sustain themselves physically and psychically at least in relative independence from the energy, commodities and information delivered by a destructive global grid—the modernization of poverty can only occur on two levels. Naturally, it will first of all mean an increasing dependence on machines and market-produced values for what people previously could provide for themselves. Secondly, it will be dependence at the very lowest rungs of a world economic empire based on capital accumulation, industrial production, resource extraction, and the structural need for cheap labor and geographic sacrifice zones.

This process is already in motion, of course—the poorest people everywhere already find themselves at that lowest rung, losing what remains of local, bioregional, ancient subsistence and culture patterns for an inadequate and increasingly precarious position within the global work machine. They are coming to resemble one another in their absolute poverty just as the international middle and upper classes look more and more the same in their restless consumerism and banality. If in the next few decades revolutionaries only succeeded in “democratizing” a spectacular-commodity society, then for all the blood and sacrifice, the Zapatistas of the ‘90s will be shot down and the new political technocrats of the twenty-first century will reconstitute the industrial pyramid with themselves at the pinnacle. Worst of all, the entire human legacy of traditional, vernacular and native modes of being will be extinguished in the process—among them the very forms of social solidarity that have animated the Mayans to continue resisting conquest for centuries.

This is not to deny that cultures have changed, will change. But will the oppressed fight a revolution for washing machines, televisions, etc.? Free elections to appoint and anoint a new set of bureaucrats to manage the consumer spectacle and the police? What should any of us be fighting for? Illich writes, “Modern societies, rich or poor, can move in either of two opposite directions. They can produce a new bill of goods—albeit safer, less wasteful, more easily shared—and thereby further intensify their dependence on consumer staples. Or, they can take a totally new approach to the interrelationship between needs and satisfactions. In other words, societies can either retain their market-intensive economies, changing only the design or the output, or they can reduce their dependence on commodities...One sees the necessity of going beyond the expert redistribution of wasteful, irrational, and paralyzing commodities, the hallmark of Radical Professionalism [or professional radicalism], the conventional wisdom of today’s good guys.” (*Toward A History of Needs*, 1978)

One is reminded of Rigoberta Menchu’s description of a ceremony in which the Quiche Mayan Indians of her village would gather store-bought and machine-made commodities like Coca Cola and other products to contrast them unfavorably with their own home-made, traditional objects as a reminder to follow their Indian ways. (See *I*

Rigoberta: An Indian Woman in Guatemala, 1984.) All traditional, vernacular and subsistence societies face this struggle. We in the industrialized north must also find our way beyond the false dichotomy of capitalist plenitude—impossible to achieve for everyone on the planet, in any case—and capitalist poverty.

Instead, societies now rich and poor (and the deeply divided classes within them), if they are to make the transition toward human community and an ecological sanity, must explore a different kind of “convivial austerity,” as Illich puts it. Such a postmodern austerity would “inspire...a society to protect personal use-value against disabling enrichment”—the kind of enrichment, to give one small example, which has convinced perhaps millions of Mexicans that gringo Wonder Bread (called Pan Bimbo in Mexico) is preferable to the nutritious tortilla. The kind of pseudo-enrichment which has convinced North Americans that television is preferable to conversation and to silence, and high-powered cars preferable to stable communities, clean air and clean water.

Fight For More Being

Hopefully, the Mexican campesinos will not fight a revolution for more things—they would have second thoughts if they could see the erosion of the spirit the availability of more things has brought here to el Norte. Hopefully they are fighting for more being. Then revolution won't be a matter of electoral reform, formal “respect” for indigenous people, post-modern patriotism, electrification or attaining the rewards of consumer society, but a social transformation that goes beyond all such categories, redefining freedom and the idea of what the good life should be.

No matter how important such questions are, one way or another, the Mayan people have no alternative but to fight. For them it's not a question of dying on their feet rather than living on their knees; they are dying on their knees. Ultimately, we have no alternative either, but to challenge all the dictators, north and south, east and west, and all their agreements—even if some of us have more margin than the Indians of Chiapas.

Contrary to the imaginary lines called borders and the fantasies of racist patriots who would wish to somehow close them to halt the countless refugees from misery and despotism, our destiny in the north is intimately linked to the destiny of the people to the south. If they lose their struggle, we will also likely lose. Our capacity to challenge the terms of wealth and poverty, to deconstruct the consumerist pseudo-paradise that now more and more resembles the two-tiered hell they are fleeing, will have repercussions throughout the southern provinces of the empire, from the Brazilian favelas to the poor pueblos of Mesoamerica.

Meanwhile, the U.S. government is watching events closely, and CIA agents are already advising the Mexican state, developing dossiers on the insurgents even as they negotiate. President Clinton very quietly sent military advisers to Guatemala and State Department operatives to Chiapas during the early stages of the revolt—for “humanitarian reasons,” to be sure. U.S. helicopters and arms, and massive amounts of money provided for the “drug war,” are also already playing a role in Mexican events. We need to find ways to undermine their plans, to create more vibrant, creative situations and movements to stop the ongoing massacre.

Finally, despite reservations, one can only be cheered by the monkey wrench the zapatistas have thrown into the gears of the New World Order, and inspired by the creative spirit and even the humor they have shown in the face of real hardship and suffering. We are all “walking on shadows,” and those who are attentive to the shaking earth may discern the vague outlines of a crumbling empire. Almost any resistance to it should be welcome. We may even be able to do something about what is to come.

The tendrils of oppression and revolt extend throughout the Americas all the way to the belly of the monster. We are all connected.

The Mayans' fight is our fight. Let's fight for more being.

¡VIVA ZAPATA!

FOOTNOTES

1. See “Chiapas Is Mexico,” by Dick J. Reavis, in the May 1994 issue of *The Progressive*.

2. Much useful information can be found in a document published by the zapatistas, “A Deconstructed Tour of Chiapas.” In an ironic and subtly enraged voice, the text, purporting to address a hypothetical tourist, presents a political economy of the region. The description of Ocosingo, called the “gateway to the Lacandon Forest” in tourist promotions, and one of the highland towns captured by the zapatistas, gives a vivid picture of the state: “Take a quick tour around the city. Principle points of interest? The two large buildings at the entrance are brothels, next door is a jail, the building further beyond, a church, this other one is a beef-processing plant, that other one, army barracks, over there is the court, the Municipal building, and way over there is Pemex [the oil company]. The rest are small piled-up houses which crumble when the huge Pemex trucks and ranch pick-up trucks pass by.” (Published in the February 1994 issue of *Terrain*, the monthly publication of the Berkeley, California Ecology Center.) See also the March/April '94 *Love and Rage*, for other articles of related interest, and some of the translated zapatista texts, including the “revolutionary laws” of EZLN “liberated territories.”

As José Luis Morin writes, “NAFTA’s effects—acceleration of foreign investment and intervention leading inevitably to greater displacement and exploitation of the region and its peoples—are already evident in the Chiapas region. Major oil companies are planning to exploit the rich oil deposits [actually extensive oil extraction is already going on, with significant ecological destruction]; transnational corporations such as Nestle are seeking to convert land to coffee production; investors are eyeing major expansions of the tourist industry centering on the great Mayan ruins, despite native people’s protest that these are the homes and temples of their ancestors. The treaty, in the words of rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos, is the ‘death sentence’ for Mexico’s indigenous peoples.” (See “An Indigenous Peoples’ Struggle for Justice,” in the Spring 1994 *Covert Action Quarterly*. This issue also contains the now-famous interview with Subcomandante Marcos from the Italian paper *L’Unita*, and other valuable material on the uprising.)

In another interesting piece, Mexican novelist and political commentator Paco Ignacio Taibo II writes that the famous, historic Chiapas town, San Cristobal de las Casas, “a gathering place for hippie tourists, has three Zen centers and hundreds of satellite dishes, and barefoot Indians walk through its streets unable to find work as bricklayers.” (See his article, “The Phoenix Rises,” in the March 28 issue of *The Nation*.)

3. So far Marcos has handled this situation with cunning and verve. When the inevitable controversy over his identity ensued after the January revolt, he compared the masks of the guerrillas to the false facade of modern Mexican society, writing in a communique, “We could show our faces, but the big difference is that Marcos has always known his real face, and the civil society is just awakening from the long and lazy dream of ‘modernity’ imposed at all cost to all. Subcomandante Marcos is ready to take off his mask. Is Mexican civil society ready to lift its mask?” (*Christian Science Monitor*, February 16, 1994)

4. See Primitivo Solis, “Indigenism and its Enemies” in FE #306, July 1981.

5. This situation of instability and uncertainty was aggravated by the assassination of Salinas’ heir apparent, Luis Donaldo Colosio, by a self-proclaimed pacifist, no less, with possible inner-party involvement as well.

6. Quoted by Alexander Cockburn in his “Beat the Devil” column in the March 28, 1994 issue of *The Nation*. *Proceso* is a useful source of information on Mexican politics for those who read Spanish.

7. One hesitates nowadays to even mention the name of Octavio Paz, once a great writer and poet, a profound thinker who turned reactionary and brittle in his old age, defending Reaganism, the Cold War, U.S. intervention in Central America, and even recently reaching new depths of dishonor by denouncing the zapatistas as murderous, leftist totalitarians, while the army was summarily executing peasant rebels. What Paz has become does not discount what he once said.

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