
CHIAPAS: THE FIRST POST-MODERN REVOLUTION

— ANA CARRIGAN —

When we came down from the mountain carrying our rucksacks, our dead and our history, we came to the city looking for our country. The country that had forgotten about us in the last corner of the land; the most solitary, the poorest, the dirtiest, the worst. We came to ask this country, our country: "Why did you abandon us there for so many, many years? Why did you leave us there with so many of our dead?"

*Subcomandante Marcos in the Cathedral of
San Cristobal de las Casas, 22 February 1994.*

The dirt road leads out of the valley, away from the fertile ranch lands that surround the provincial capital of Ocosingo. It follows the path of a narrow ravine through the foothills, climbing between forests of pine trees, headed eastward for the Lacandon Rainforest, into the area known simply as "La Selva" — The Jungle. This is the road down which two regiments of the Zapatista Army traveled on the afternoon of 31 December 1993 on their way to attack San Cristobal de las Casas and Ocosingo. In every village they passed as they came down from the mountains, carrying their weapons and their handmade uniforms concealed in backpacks and coffee sacks, their numbers swelled.

Today, some thirty kilometers outside Ocosingo, a row of boulders blocking the road marks the frontier of Zapatista-held territory. Beyond, deep within the valleys and ravines of the rainforest, sheltered by mountain ranges that loom as impenetrable as a wall, lies the Maya world. Last January, the international press, among them many veterans of the Central American conflicts of the 1980s, came to these Indian territories looking for the past — and found the future. When the twelve-day shooting war between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the Mexican National Army abruptly ended, the rebel spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, began a dialogue with the Mexican people through the pages of the national press that circumvented the government's best efforts to contain the Zapatistas in their jungle habitat. It became quickly

Ana Carrigan is a Colombian-Irish journalist, writer, and filmmaker. She is the author of Palace of Justice: A Colombian Tragedy, and Salvador Witness; her films include Roses in December.

apparent that this first revolution of the post-Cold War era was quite unlike anything that Latin America had seen before. Who had ever known a revolutionary movement which did not want to take power for itself? Who would expect to meet a rebel leader who openly declared that the rebels had "neither the desire nor the capacity" to impose their own program on the rest of the country and who repeated, insistently, that the reason the rebels had taken up arms was in order to establish, "not the triumph of a single party, organization, or alliance of organizations," but to create "a democratic space, where the confrontation between diverse political points of view can be resolved."¹ These pronouncements revealed a clear break with the dogmas and romantic machismo of every previous Latin American guerrilla movement. It soon became clear that these contemporary representatives of the ancient Maya culture were presenting the world with history's first post-modern revolution.

The Zapatista rebellion is an explosion, rising from the submerged roots of Mexico's forgotten past, caused by a modernization program that imposed a Mexican version of *perestroika* without a hint of *glasnost*. The rebels' resort to arms says far more about the Mexican government's refusal to respond to decades of crisis in the Indian communities of Chiapas than it does about the Zapatistas or the reforms they seek. Economically, the Zapatista ideology is anti-modern only in reaction to the impact that the government's modernization policies, imposed without regard for Indian needs, have had on the Indians' ability to feed their families and sustain community life. The Zapatista alternative model of development does not constitute a rejection of capitalism so much as a radical reform, a redefinition, and democratization of a system whose excesses threaten the Indians' survival.

The youthful Zapatista leaders in Chiapas live in a landscape that their Maya forebears have inhabited for at least a thousand years. They see themselves as modernizers, dedicated to revitalizing a history and a culture that has been handed down to them by their elders. The Zapatistas are not seeking to create some imaginary, future utopia. Their goals are firmly rooted in Mexico's past. Their magna carta is the Mexican Constitution of 1917, with its recognition of the indigenous right to self-government and its radical agrarian reform. Their historical model is the Indian and peasant revolt of the second decade of this century, led by the legendary figure whose name they have appropriated, Emiliano Zapata. Of the original Zapatistas, Octavio Paz has written that they "attempted to rectify the history of Mexico and the very meaning of our existence as a nation. . . . The Zapatista movement did not conceive of Mexico as a future to be realized but as a return to origins."² Today, the history the Chiapas rebels seek to rectify is the sixty-five-year-old domination of every aspect of Mexican life by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and their chief aim is to revitalize the principles for which Zapata fought and which the

1. Letter from Subcomandante Marcos to the Mexican Press, 20 January 1994.

2. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961).

ruling party ultimately appropriated and betrayed. The neo-Zapatista Indians want what no Mexican leader since President Lazaro Cardenas, in the mid-1930s, has been prepared to give Mexico's Indians: land, liberty, justice and respect. They seek a pluralistic, multiethnic democracy; the recognition of the traditional right of self-government in the indigenous communities; and the restoration of a lost democratic agrarian ideal. Through access to education, technology, markets and support services, the rebels seek to transform this ideal into an independent, self-sustaining, and economically and ecologically viable society.

Although the Mexican Government has tried to deny the rebellion's indigenous origins and leadership, no one can seriously doubt that Indian ethnic identity — as defined by race, culture, language, and their relationship to the land — is the defining characteristic of the Zapatista uprising. Ever since the Spanish conquest, ownership and usage of the land have been the paramount issues for Mexico's Indians. Anthropologist Francesco Pellizzi, who has spent twenty years doing field work in Chiapas, writes: "To the Indian peasant the land is the place of life and death, of cyclical discontinuity and of continuous regeneration, the place of Being, because it is the only place of cultural survival, of ethnic identity."³ In 1992, when President Salinas's repeal of the revolutionary agrarian legislation broke faith with the promise embodied in the Mexican Constitution, thousands of Maya Indians from Chiapas's four largest ethnic groups reached for their guns to recover traditional Indian sovereignty over their culture and their lives.

Nevertheless, 1994 is different from the 1911 revolution in one crucially important dimension. The presence of the white, urban, university-educated poet-warrior-spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, at the revolution's core has created, for the first time in modern Mexican history, a unique fusion between "the two Mexicos": one white, modern and Western; the other Indian, traditional and Meso-american. Octavio Paz writes that the dichotomy between "the two Mexicos" — one developed, the other undeveloped — is "the central theme of our modern history, the problem on whose solution our very existence as a people depends."⁴

In a recent controversial critique of contemporary Mexican society that predates the rebellion, Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil wrote that ever since the Spanish Conquest, Mexican history has been trapped in a cycle of repetitive conflicts between the protagonists of two antithetical civilizations — the Western and the Meso-american — locked in permanent confrontation. Bonfil attributes the contemporary tensions from this 500-year-old conflict

3. Francesco Pellizzi, "To Seek Refuge: Nation and Ethnicity in Exile," in *Ethnicities and Nations: Processes of Interethnic Relations in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific* (Austin, TX: Rothko Chapel, 1983).

4. Paz, "Critique of the Pyramid," in *The Other Mexico* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 1970). Translation by Grove Press, 1972; included in *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985).

between the descendants of the conquerors and the conquered to Mexico's nineteenth century liberators' failure to eliminate the "internalized colonial structures, with their fundamentally racist ideology. . . . In Mexico, the process of civilization has always signified to 'de-Indianize' and to impose the western [influence]." ⁵ In all of his writings, Bonfil laments modern Mexico's denial and exclusion of its indigenous past. In the tenacious struggle between these two antagonistic worlds, which Bonfil calls "*El Mexico Imaginario*" and "*El Mexico Profundo*," he sees the failure of every Mexican attempt at development and modernization. "In every case," he writes of *El Mexico Imaginario's* efforts to enforce its own blueprint, "the future is always somewhere else. . . . The task of constructing a national culture consists in imposing a foreign model, which, in and of itself, eliminates [our] cultural diversity, and can only achieve unity on the basis of suppressing that which exists." ⁶ The writings of Paz and Bonfil, read today — in the heat of the debate which has brought "the hidden face" of Bonfil's *Mexico Profundo* and the "submerged and repressed 'Other Mexico'" of Octavio Paz to the forefront of Mexican national consciousness — illuminate the forces that currently threaten to tear the fabric of Mexican society.

The Zapatista rebellion occupies the very center of this historic chasm separating Bonfil's Mexico Imaginario from *El Mexico Profundo*. When Subcomandante Marcos speaks for the Indians "who are my bosses," the poet-philosopher-warrior of the Zapatista movement appears to open the map of Mexico at a faded, almost obliterated page. Charting the contours of the Maya experience for his countrymen, he traces the paths along which he invites them to follow him into this hidden world of "the Other Mexico." With his mastery of the idioms of both Mexicos, Marcos has built bridges between the remote Indian villagers of the rainforest and the white/mestizo dwellers of the urban centers, so that for the first time, Bonfil's "two cultural universes" have become accessible to each other. Marcos's messages from the excluded fringe of Mexican life have reverberated on two fronts. For the indigenous population, the Zapatista movement has legitimized the Indian's tenacious commitment to determine their own history; for the country at large, the Zapatista call for the dismantling of the links between the PRI and the government has projected the Indians into the center of a revitalized national debate on the need to democratize a political system described as "the perfect dictatorship" by Mario Vargas Llosa. In the process, Marcos has succeeded in forging an alliance between the Maya rebels of eastern Chiapas and a broad spectrum of grassroots activists in the Mexican civil society who also call for the political system to open up. This alliance, if it holds, could represent the Zapatistas' most unique, and potentially most revolutionary, contribution to Mexico's modern history.

5. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *Mexico Profundo, Una Civilizacion Negada* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1989).

6. Ibid.

“Poor Chiapas, Rich Chiapas”

I watched my father die because there was no money in our village to buy him medicine for his stomach. That's why I went with the Zapatistas. . . . I decided to fight because if we're all going to die it might as well be for something.

*Raul Hernandez, 17 years old, Zapatista prisoner,
quoted in Expresso, 8 February 1993.*

The state of Chiapas is the eighth largest in Mexico and one of the richest in natural resources. It has oil, gas, timber, and hydroelectric power. Its three major dams produce 55 percent of the nation's electricity, and 86 oil wells pump out more than 25,000,000 barrels of crude oil annually and more than 500 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day; oil and natural gas production account respectively for 21 percent and 47 percent of the national production. The state is the largest coffee producer in the country — 35 percent of all the coffee grown in Mexico comes from Chiapas — and the second largest producer of beef.⁷ It is the second largest producer of corn; bananas, honey, melons, avocados and cocoa are all sold for export. During the last decade, local politicians and businessmen (among them a recent state governor) have created immense fortunes for themselves by exploiting the rainforest's precious woods, especially mahogany and tropical cedars; between 1981 and 1989, seven million cubic meters of these woods were harvested, with the net profit from these logging operations amounting to eight million dollars in 1988 alone.⁸ In 1989, exports from Chiapas were valued at 200 million dollars.

Yet despite the state's considerable resources, over 70 percent of the population — 2,200,000 Indians and mestizo peasants — live below the poverty line, compared to only six percent nationwide.⁹ The lack of basic services for the population places Chiapas on a par with that of any poverty-stricken developing country. The education system is the worst in the country: Chiapas has the highest illiteracy rate in Mexico (30 percent statewide, closer to 50 percent in the conflict zone).¹⁰ In the rainforest communities, where 52 percent of the popula-

7. Onecimo Hidalgo, *Economía del Estado de Chiapas*, paper for the Centro de Información y Análisis de Chiapas A.C. (1988).

8. Subcomandante Marcos, *Chiapas: The Southeast in Two Winds, a Storm and a Prophecy* (Mexico City: Mexican Press, January 1994).

9. Julio Moguel, *Salinas's Failed War on Poverty*, NACLA Report on The Americas, vol. XXVIII, no. 1 (July/August 1994). See also Moguel, "Chiapas y el Pronasol," *La Jornada del Campo*, 25 January 1994.

10. Moguel, "Chiapas y el Pronasol." See also *Agenda Estadística del Estado de Chiapas, 1993*, based on 1990 figures compiled by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía y Informática (INEGI) and quoted in *El Proceso*, 10 January 1993, and in "Las Cifras de la Miseria," in "Chiapas: La Guerra de los Olvidados, Suplemento Especial," *Síntesis*, January 1994; and Rocio Rodiles, "Las Canadas: radiografía social y productiva de una región en conflicto," *La Jornada del Campo*, 25 January 1994.

tion is under fifteen years of age,¹¹ there are only 217 primary schools for almost 65,000 school-age children; in the municipalities of Ocosingo and Las Margaritas — both focal centers of the conflict zone — 40 percent and 33 percent of school-age children, respectively, never attend school (the national rate is 14 percent). In the rainforest, 39 percent of the population has never been to school, 41 percent cannot read, and 36 percent speak no Spanish.¹²

Chiapas also suffers from an abysmal lack of infrastructure. In spite of the state's energy resources, between 70 and 80 percent of the houses in the villages and towns of eastern Chiapas have no access to electricity or gas; 62 percent have no drinking water; more than 85 percent have no drainage; and more than 80 percent have mud floors.¹³ The state's transportation system is also minimalist; just two-thirds of the municipalities have paved or partially paved roads, and twelve thousand rural communities can only be reached by mountain trails. Only two railroad lines exist, both of which date from the beginning of the century.

Chiapas also has the lowest level of health services in the country. There is one doctor for every 1,500 residents — one-half the national average — and only 0.3 hospital beds per one thousand inhabitants, one-third the level of Mexico as a whole. Infant mortality in the rainforest is over ten percent. These statistics help explain why the major causes of death in the Indian villages of Chiapas have not changed in forty years; malnutrition, cholera, tuberculosis, dysentery and other poverty-related, curable diseases account for an estimated 15,000 Indian deaths each year.¹⁴

Chiapas also holds the record for the highest unemployment rate (50 percent) and the lowest salaries paid to rural workers in a state where six out of ten of those employed work in agriculture. One-fifth of the population lives outside the money economy and 40 percent of workers receive less than the minimum wage. Subsistence farmers traditionally supplemented their incomes by hiring themselves out as day-workers on large estates, but unemployment has increased dramatically since the early eighties, when large coffee farmers began employing Guatemalan refugees at substantially lower wages than their Mexican counterparts; in the last decade, the average real wages of rural day workers have fallen by 51 percent.¹⁵ These economic hardships, caused in part by a policy of official neglect amounting to a penalization of the Indian population for its independence from the PRI, form the backdrop to the Zapatista rebellion. The rainforest Indians have virtually no access to markets, credit, technical support services, tractors, education, clean water or health services.

Chiapas is a lawless state, run by corrupt PRI sheriffs who protect the interests

11. 1993 World Bank Statistics, cited by James D. Nations, "The Ecology of the Zapatista Revolt," *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Spring 1994.

12. Moguel, "Chiapas y el Pronasol." See also *Agenda Estadística del Estado de Chiapas, 1993*; "Las Cifras de la Miseria"; and "Chiapas" (*Proceso*), 10 January 1994.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.* See also "En Esta Hora de Gracia," Pastoral Letter of Bishop Samuel Ruiz to Pope John Paul II, August 1993.

15. Moguel, "Salinas's Failed War on Poverty."

of the bastion of PRI's main supporters, large landowners and cattle ranchers, who monopolize two million hectares — one-half of the state's total land — for grazing.¹⁶ In Chiapas, all economic and political power resides in ownership of the land; from the governor's office to the smallest local courtroom, the sheriff in charge is almost always a large landowner or a cattleman. The second most important pillar of the PRI machine is the network of *caciques*, Indian political bosses who administer the state programs have a monopoly on transport, on markets, and on access to all credit. They control the official peasant and Indian organizations, recruit informers to infiltrate independent organizations, and hire the cattlemen's enforcers, the *Guardias Blancas* — paramilitary mercenaries who invade and seize Indian land, create havoc in Indian villages, massacre civilians, and "disappear" or assassinate Indian and peasant leaders.¹⁷ Frequently, the *Guardias* are accompanied on their forays by state and federal police or Mexican Army troops.

The federal government, however, is as responsible for this anti-Indian apartheid as the corrupt local elites. Historically, electoral fraud in Chiapas has provided the PRI with their largest percentage (98 to 99 percent) of the vote nationwide; in the 1991 local elections, fifty of the villages in the conflict zone reported a 100 percent turnout for the PRI. Consequently, the Mexican government has been unwilling to challenge the political and economic actors who consistently deliver strong regional support. "The government is in a trap," Jorge Castaneda told *Proceso* in January. "Like every authoritarian system it cannot afford to fight against the structures that provide its life force. . . . Its true base of political support [in Chiapas] is not in the electorate, it is in the economic and social sectors — the business sectors and the *caciques* — whom it cannot attack because it depends on them for its life."

Origins of the Rebellion

We used to have laws in the Republic of Mexico. For example: Article 27. Emiliano Zapata and his soldiers imposed that law with their lives and their blood, and in a few hours, without consulting the peasants, Salinas de Gortari wiped them out. When we knew that our land could be sold or taken from us, when we heard that there would be no more land for us, that nearly finished us. At that moment my brothers wanted to rise up.

*EZLN Commander Major Mario,
Lacandon Rainforest, 30 January 1994.*

16. *Agenda Estadística del Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, 1991*. Quoted in Neil Harvey, "Chiapas: del Congreso Indígena a la guerra campesina," *La Jornada del Campo*, 25 January 1994.

17. Areceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, *Chiapas: Cronología de un etnocidio reciente. Realidad social violenta y violatoria a los derechos humanos*, 1988); and Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, *Conquest Continued: Disregard for Human and Indigenous Rights in the Mexican State of Chiapas* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 1992).

The Zapatistas made their first, spectacular public appearance in San Cristobal de las Casas in 1992. On October 12th of that year, amid demonstrations marking "The Year of the Indian, 500 Years of Resistance," four thousand young men and women armed with bows and arrows suddenly appeared out of the crowd. Marching in military formation, they advanced to the central plaza where they attacked the monument to the founder of San Cristobal, the sixteenth century Spanish *encomendador*, Diego de Mazariegos. As the symbol of 500 years of oppression crashed from its pedestal, the Indians hacked it to pieces and pocketed the fragments before disappearing. In the annals of Indian resistance, the toppling of Mazariegos' statue had a symbolic resonance equivalent to the destruction of the Berlin Wall. The next time the Zapatistas came to the city was New Year's Day, 1994. They had replaced their bows and arrows with assault rifles and exchanged their traditional dress for homemade army uniforms and ski masks. But the anti-colonial message was the same: "We are the product of 500 years of struggle," they declared. "NAFTA [the North American Free Trade Agreement] is a death sentence for the Indians." Five hundred years of resistance against denial and exclusion and now NAFTA, the latest development vision of *El Mexico Imaginario* — these are the two disparate poles of the Zapatista rebellion.

The origins of the Zapatista rebellion are rooted in the unequal distribution of the land. Other key factors that propelled the dynamic of the revolt are the increasingly brutal repression of the independent peasant and Indian organizations throughout the 1980s, and the economic devastation within the Indian communities caused by the policies of the preceding decade. Yet the state's refusal to grant land to the Indians, as mandated in Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, is the primary cause. Every other ill, including the destruction of the Lacandon Rainforest, stems from a corrupt and discriminatory system of land distribution. In Chiapas, successive state administrations have ignored or circumvented the land reforms that Emiliano Zapata won for the Indians and poor peasants early in the century. In 1916, at the height of the Revolution, eight thousand of the largest families owned three million hectares of the best land — almost half of the land surface of the state. In 1990, the same proportion of the land was in the hands of just six thousand landowners — most of them cattle ranchers — while a million Indian *ejidatarios* (villagers who own and manage their land collectively) struggled to survive on the remaining three million acres of poor, marginal land, only 41 percent of which was officially classified as suitable for farming.¹⁸

Before President Salinas's amendments, Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution reflected the Agrarian Law drafted by Zapata in 1915. "From the beginning," writes John Womack, "the [Zapata] movement had been a deliberate enterprise by county chiefs to restore the integrity of the state's villages, to gain local rights of participation in national progress."¹⁹ For Emiliano Zapata and his chiefs, "*Tierra y Libertad!*" — the rallying call of the peasant army — was no

18. Neil Harvey, "Chiapas: de la concertacion a la violencia," *La Jornada del Campo*, 25 January 1994.

19. John Womack, Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

rhetorical slogan; by giving the Indians land and the freedom to decide at the local village level how it should be cultivated, Zapata aimed to restore the essential features of the Indian agrarian tradition. Octavio Paz wrote that while Zapata's ideas were simple and few, they were precisely the ones needed "to break the political and economic shackles that bound us" and were designed to establish legislation that would be "adjusted to Mexican realities."²⁰

When the fighting stopped in 1920, Mexico had a populist agrarian law based on Zapata's ideas and designed to meet the needs of the nation's indigenous population. In Zapata's home state of Morelos, new agrarian laws placed precise limits on the size of large estates; restored traditional communal lands to their original owners; recognized "the traditional and historic right" of the villages and communities to administer "their fields of communal distribution and common use (*ejidos*) in the form which they judge proper"; affirmed "the unquestionable right which belongs to every Mexican of possessing and cultivating an extension of land, the products of which permit him to cover his needs and those of his family"; and provided legal protection against any intrigues between corrupt village leaders and speculators by making the government grants permanent. The Revolutionary Agrarian Law of 1915, drafted by Zapata's legal advisors, stated: "The farms which the Government cedes to communities or individuals are not alienable, nor can they be mortgaged in any form, all contracts which tend to go against this disposition being null."²¹ In short, Zapata saw to it that the Indians' collectively owned and farmed *ejido* lands, once granted, would never be taken away. These laws were never enacted in Chiapas, but for seventy-five years they remained on the national statute book, documenting the principle of indigenous rights to land ownership and legitimizing the Indians' struggles. The original Article 27 embodied the Mexican state's most sacred pact with the indigenous population, and the demand for its restoration is a preeminent priority for the current rebels.

By the time the 1911 Revolution had ended, Zapata, already a legend in his lifetime, had become a national mythic hero. When news of his murder reached Mexico City in 1919, the editorials of various newspapers warned the post-revolutionary leaders that to destroy his myth "would require reforms to destroy the injustices that had generated him."²² Seventy-five years later, when the Zapatista Army of National Liberation seized San Cristobal, the injustices of that earlier time were still virtually intact. "Why Zapata? Didn't Zapata come from the state of Morelos?" a tourist with a camcorder asked a young guerrilla on the street in San Cristobal on New Year's Night. The young Indian answered: "Because Zapata, even though he's dead, is the food of the Indians. His fight made us grow. He is the fertilizer of the people of the land, the one that nourishes us and makes us strong."²³

20. Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

21. *The Agrarian Law of 1915*, translated by John Womack Jr., in Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, Appendix.

22. Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*.

23. "Interview with Shulamis Hirsch," *Sintesis*, 5 January 1994, p. 13.

The Arrival of Marcos

Why is it necessary to kill and to die so that you, and through you the rest of the world, should listen to Ramona, sitting here beside me, say such shocking things as that Indian women want to live, want to study, want hospitals, want medicines, want schools, want food, want respect, want justice, want dignity? Why is it necessary to kill and to die so that . . . you will pay attention to what she has to say?

Subcomandante Marcos, in the Cathedral of San Cristobal de las Casas, 23 February 1994.

The history of the Zapatista movement is inseparable from the history of the disorderly colonization of the Lacandon Rainforest, which, over the course of the last thirty years, has been transformed into a human and ecological nightmare. The current generation of Indian rebels is descended from an Indian diaspora that began in the 1930s, when, under pressure from President Lazaro Cardenas to comply with the land reform laws, state authorities began sending landless Indians to establish *ejidos* in the virgin *Selva Lacandona*. The decision to hand over state lands to the Indians evaded the problem of redistributing the land of the large estates, as mandated by law. Pursuing the Indian dreams of land and autonomy, thousands of the very poorest of the Indians, released from debt peonage, fled their serf-like conditions as *acassillados* ("the attached") of the large estates and trekked into the Lacandon Rainforest in search of a better future. When the first wave of migrants arrived, the rainforest covered 13,000 square kilometers of almost unpopulated territory, stretching eastward from the towns of Ocosingo, Altamirano and Las Margaritas to the Usumacinta River and the Guatemalan border. Since 1960, the population of the rainforest has increased from six thousand to 300,000, nearly three quarters of the forest has been cleared and burned for *milpas* and cattle pastures, and an additional 2,500 square kilometers have been seized for oil and gas exploration. Today, only 3,400 square kilometers of virgin rainforest survive, protected in the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve.²⁴

Maya identity and culture has historically varied from village to village; the village is the embodiment of the traditions, the history, and the ethnic identity of each community. But an Indian village without land is an aberration, and since the 1930s, successive waves of Indian migrants abandoned everything that was familiar to them to claim the promised new lands and establish new communities in an alien environment. They came from a variety of ethnic groups; some even came from neighboring states that the authorities wanted to clear of Indians. As each new group arrived, they penetrated still deeper into the jungle. In the 1960s, local timber merchants bulldozed roads into the heart of the rainforest to begin extracting truckloads of precious woods, and addi-

24. James D. Nations, "The Ecology of the Zapatista Revolt"; and Xochtil Leyva Solano, "Militancia politico-religiosa e identidad en la Lacandona," address to the II Mayan International Congress, 1992).

tional waves of Indian migrants followed in their wake. But after the Indians had cleared the land and planted their *milpas* with corn and beans, cattlemen from out of state drove down these same roads, took over the new *ejidos*, converted them to pasture, and pushed the Indians ever further into the rainforest.²⁵ So began two decades of vicious land conflicts between cattlemen and Indians.

When Marcos and his small group of political organizers came to the rainforest in 1983, they found that the Indians were no longer so alone; for twenty years, led by Bishop Don Samuel Ruiz Garcia, the church workers of the San Cristobal diocese had been intensely involved in Indian community life. Bishop Ruiz is the greatest defender of Indian rights in Latin America since his sixteenth-century forebear, the first Bishop of San Cristobal, Fray Bartolome de las Casas. In the 1960s, he participated in the preparations for the Second Vatican Council; on his return from Rome, he brought Pope John's "preferential option for the poor" — the source of liberation theology — to the rainforest. It must have seemed extraordinary for the Indians to find the new Bishop turning up on foot to visit their isolated villages, talking with them in their own languages, sleeping on their mud floors, and sharing their beans and dry tortillas. As he learned about the Indians' culture, he introduced Christian concepts in language that related to their daily lives; he gave them hope for a better future and taught them to love their neighbors and to have faith in their own ability to liberate themselves from their misery — views necessary to unite a fragmented and disparate people and to build a sense of collective security and community.

The bishop sent his priests and nuns to live for months at a time with the Indian rainforest communities, where they found a scattered, heterogeneous population of exiles. Abandoned by the PRI, virtually cut off from any contact with the larger world, each small *ejido* community, suspicious of others that were geographically, linguistically, and culturally estranged from it, still clung to the traditions of its ancestral village, making union with their neighbors impossible. The Church workers used the Book of Exodus, translated into Indian dialects, to foster solidarity and a shared identity among the Indians. The Exodus story helped the Indians understand the serfdom from which they had escaped and offered a vision of the freedom they yearned for in their own version of the "Promised Land," the Lacandon Rainforest. Gradually, under the guidance of the Church, this disparate population united and forged a new, pan-Indian identity, through which they rediscovered and reinvented their ancestral traditions. The bishop's church initiated irreversible change in the Indian communities. It inspired them with self-respect and pride in their ancient culture and laid the groundwork for a vigorous new sense of identity and community. Church workers trained and educated a network of Indian catechists and deacons who

25. Rodiles, "Las Canadas: radiografia social y productiva de una region en conflicto"; Frank Cancian and Peter Brown, "Who is Rebelling in Chiapas?" *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Spring 1994); and Xochitil Leyva Solano, "Militancia politico-religiosa e identidad en la Lacandona" (1992) and Leyva Solano, *Lacandona Babilonia: en las postrimerias del siglo*, (Mexico City: Ojaresca, 1993).

became community and regional leaders; the Church sponsored and promoted the development of Indian organizations, and Church protection and support legitimized the Indian struggle for the four essentials of every small community: land, education, health, and access to markets. By the time that Marcos and the handful of political organizers he brought with him from out of state arrived in the rainforest, the Indians had been analyzing and discussing their own problems, in their own languages, for the better part of a decade; they had already developed an acute awareness of their rights and needs.

The Zapatista newcomers came from out of state. Some were veterans of the 1970s peasant uprisings in Guerrero or of worker and student groups who had organized shanty dwellers in the urban slums of the north. Their influences were the classical political-military ideologies of the Latin American left. They listened to the revolutionary messages broadcast by *Radio Sandino* from Nicaragua and by the FMLN *Radio Venceremos* from El Salvador; their self-image was cast in the romantic history of the guerrillas of Cuba and Nicaragua; and they saw themselves leading an indigenous army to the overthrow of the Mexican state-party system. When they met the Indian world, they discovered they had to relearn everything from scratch. The revolutionaries approached the Church, hoping to convince the bishop to sponsor their presence in the communities,²⁶ but, as Marcos told the Mexican press, the bishop turned them away. "From the moment we arrived there was friction," Marcos said, "the Church said armed conflict was not possible in Mexico, that the change had to come peacefully, through mass democratic mobilization. The work of the Church was always in direct opposition to our work."²⁷ So the Zapatistas withdrew into the mountains, where they learned to survive clandestinely in a hostile environment, until, just as Marcos had predicted, external violence changed the political dynamic inside the communities and eroded the influence of the Church. "The Church was committed to change through open political participation," said Marcos, "and the communities tried to do that by every means possible. But the state kept strangling them, the numbers of deaths kept rising. We always knew the state was on our side, in the sense that it would prove [the Church's way] was not enough . . . that a different way forward was necessary."²⁸ The Zapatistas' arrival in Chiapas had coincided with the regional expansion of cattle ranching and an especially repressive state administration. As the landowners needed more acreage to convert their estates to pasture, they invaded villages and seized *ejido* lands. The young Indians then turned to the Zapatistas to create self-defense units to protect them against the *Guardias Blancas*.

"We found each other," says Marcos, "and we began to speak in two different

26. Guillermo Correa, "Hay guerrilleros en Chiapas desde ocho años: grupos radicales infiltraron a la iglesia y a las comunidades," *Proceso*, 13 September 1993. Also Ignacio Ramirez, "Grupos de izquierda de Torreon utilizaron la infraestructura religiosa y radicalizaron a los catequeístas: Samuel Ruiz," *Proceso*, 28 February 1994. Also author's interview in San Cristobal in March 1994 with a leader of the Church-sponsored Independent Indian Organisation ARIC (also known as the *Union de Uniones*).

27. "Interview: Subcomandante Marcos," *El Proceso*, 21 February 1994.

28. *Ibid.*

languages. They needed military instruction and we needed the support of a social base."²⁹ But they lacked a common objective. The newcomers spoke of the need for armed struggle to bring about a revolution and a change of power, yet Marcos and his group quickly learned that no project could proceed without the support of the majority of the villagers. As he explains it, "on the one hand there was the initial program of the Zapatista Army: a completely undemocratic and authoritarian program, as undemocratic and authoritarian as any army can be; and on the other there was the indigenous tradition, that before the Conquest was a way of life, and that after the Conquest became their only way of surviving. . . . The communities, isolated, cornered, saw themselves obligated to defend themselves collectively, to govern themselves collectively."³⁰ In short, any indigenous army that the Zapatista organizers might recruit would have to submit to the collective decision-making authority of the village assemblies. If the civilians were going to be calling the shots, the classical, vertical structure of a revolutionary guerrilla movement would not work. Some entirely new form of political-military structure would have to be invented.

The Zapatistas faced a choice: They could adopt the fundamental Indian principle of government by democratic, collective decision making and incorporate it as a central element of their revolutionary structures, or they could leave. As Marcos admits, it took time for the revolutionaries to adapt to the Indian reality: "It's not like we said: 'Well, we are going to learn and see what happens.' No! We were closed-minded, like any other orthodox leftist, like any theoretician who believes he knows the truth!"³¹ For several of the original Zapatistas, the challenges of abdicating the leadership role and of adopting Indian ways and Indian priorities were too tough; only Marcos and five of his companions stuck it out. In the ensuing collaboration between the sophisticated, white, urban leftists and the traditional, peasant, Indians in their isolated rainforest communities, both sides learned from each other and were changed by each other.

The resulting revolutionary movement defies categorization. The unique collaboration between the Indians and the outsiders produced a military force commanded by a collective Indian civilian leadership, the Indigenous Clandestine Revolutionary Committee (CCRI). Committee members are elected by the civilian population in their democratic village assemblies and obey the decisions the villagers make. "If we had been orthodox leftists we never would have worked with indigenous people," said Marcos. "We arrived here and we were confronted by this reality, the indigenous reality, and it continues to control us. Ultimately, the theoretical confronted the practical and something happened. The result was the Zapatista Army of National Liberation."³²

29. Interview in the Selva Lacandona with Subcomandante Marcos, by Pablo Salazar Devereaux (Haitian Information Bureau), Ana Laura Hernandez and Gustavo Rodriguez (Amor y Rabia, Mexico), Eugenio Aguilera (Nightcrawlers Anarchist Black Cross), *Peacenet*, 11 May 1994.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

Through that first small nucleus of self-defense units, the Zapatista organizers slowly won the Indians' trust. Before the Zapatistas came, the most effective force in the region had been the church-sponsored Indian organization known as *Union de Uniones* (UdU), which represented six thousand families and concentrated on developing small-scale economic projects and education and health programs. As the Zapatistas secretly began recruiting and organizing in the villages, competition with the UdU leaders led to conflicts, and Bishop Ruiz's objective of building a unified Indian coalition faded. Over time, some villages split their loyalties. Eventually the UdU leadership was infiltrated by the PRI, and in the months prior to the uprising, some 100 families fled from the rainforest to the townships, where many received houses and employment from *caciques* and ranchers.

Eventually too, the Zapatistas infiltrated the Church infrastructure through the Bishop's regional network of young Indian catechists. Every village had two or more catechists, described by Bishop Ruiz as "those who gather and harvest the community thought." Their disaffection with the Church and disavowal of the Bishop's authority became key elements in the community's acceptance of the Zapatistas. The EZLN also ran vaccination campaigns for children; organized programs to help young Indian women break free from the submissiveness so deeply engrained in Indian culture; banned alcohol among their members; and infiltrated the leadership of the UdU, converting several thousand of their members to the Zapatista cause. In 1991, they also organized a radical civilian front organization, the *Asociacion Nacional Campesina Indigena Emiliano Zapata* (ANCIEZ),³³ which carried the fight for land throughout Chiapas and was responsible for the attack on Diego Mazariegos' monument.

Marcos never ceased working to convince the Indians to adopt the wider political objectives of unseating the PRI and opening a national political space for a pluralistic, multiethnic democracy. To this end, the Zapatistas taught the Indians Mexican history and Spanish; they also promoted Mexico's national heroes as legitimate symbols of a joint Mexican/Indian heritage. These efforts diminished the isolation and separatism of the Indian communities and ultimately forged the Pan-Indian nationalism that distinguishes this Indian rebellion from any that has occurred before.

Meanwhile, the army secretly trained and expanded. Recruitment was conducted person by person, at night, in one-on-one interviews. Each new recruit was escorted to one of the clandestine training camps in the mountains only after he or she had signed a formal oath of loyalty and secrecy.³⁴ The soldiers, who never left their villages for more than a few days or nights at a time, trained unnoticed, carrying out their daily farming activities until a few days before the rebellion began. Consequently, the non-Zapatista members among the Indian population — as well as the Church workers, the cattlemen and the PRI — all believed that the armed groups, which everyone knew were training in the mountains, existed solely for self-defense purposes. But in the summer of 1992,

33. Interview in San Cristobal with ARIC leader; see note 26.

34. *Ibid.*

after the change in the agrarian law, the younger members of the Zapatista Army began asking when the uprising would begin. The leaders then began to consult with the villagers. The years of political work had achieved its objective: when the CCRI put the question to the village assemblies, the population voted overwhelmingly for revolt. The CCRI instructed Marcos to prepare for an uprising by the end of 1993, and the tempo of the recruiting drive accelerated.

Ultimately the population adopted the dual agendas of the Zapatista rebellion: the regional, indigenous demands on one hand, and the national objectives of democracy, justice and liberty in a pluralistic multiethnic society on the other. "That didn't occur until elements of the community entered the army," Marcos said. "In that moment, the difference between the combatant force and the civilian force began to disappear, until it reached the point you see now, when there is no line that separates the civilians from the Zapatistas. . . . The moment came at which the Zapatistas had to consult the communities to make a decision. A moment arrives at which you can't do anything without the approval of the people with whom you work. It was something understood by both parties; they understood that we wouldn't do anything without consulting them, and we understood that if we did anything without consulting them we would lose them. . . . We couldn't draw a solid line between combatant forces and civilian forces."³⁵

A Revolution Foretold

The Mexican State, liberal, republican and federal, of equality before the law, is one that has always had to be a [state] of justice. When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, [the state] forgot this, the people, rising in their revolution, reminded it.

President Carlos Salinas's address to the Nation, early in 1989.

We rose up, not to kill or be killed, but so that they would listen to us.

Subcomandante Marcos in San Cristobal, February, 1994.

"In Mexico, the past reappears because it is a hidden present," wrote Octavio Paz.³⁶ In 1911, as in 1994, the conditions that precipitated Emiliano Zapata's peasant Indian rising in the southern state of Morelos resulted from another period of economic reforms and modernization. Like the Salinas government, the regime of Porfirio Diaz also reformed the fiscal system, paid the foreign debt on time, and brought financial stability to Mexico. Foreign capital, mainly European, poured into the country to develop the mines and the oil fields. Then as now, foreign governments extolled the talents of Mexico's strong, efficient ruler (from whom they bought three quarters of the country's mineral wealth).

35. Interview with Subcomandante Marcos, *Peacenet*; see note 29.

36. Paz, "Critique of the Pyramid."

Sugar cane and rice, grown for foreign markets and transported on a growing network of new roads and railroads, brought immense wealth to the regime's favored class — the large landowners. In Diaz's day it was also widely reported that Mexico had become a modern land of peace and prosperity.

But this concentration of land and power in the hands of the few was accomplished at a high price. The greed of the feudal landowners was insatiable. When the regime had absorbed all of the land legally inherited from the breakup of Church properties, Diaz seized what remained of the communal indigenous lands. When the Indians resisted, rural police working for the landowners attacked and destroyed Indian villages. In 1911, the revolt against Diaz, initiated one year earlier by Francisco Madero, was failing when the Indians and peasants in the rural south, led by Zapata, rose up in support of the revolutionaries and went to war to recover their lands. The Mexican Revolution was born.

In 1992, "every man, woman and child who was still awake at the end of the assembly," according to Marcos, had voted to instruct the Zapatista army to prepare for war. As in 1911, the Indian rising was precipitated by the impact of an economic reform and modernization program, imposed from above and driven by the perceived exigencies of a foreign model of development. No one disputes the credit due to President Carlos Salinas for rescuing Mexico from the financial ruin brought on by the debt crisis of 1982. Yet while his economic reform policies attracted sixty billion dollars of foreign investment (much of it speculative investment in the booming Mexican stock exchange), controlled the national debt, stabilized the peso, and brought down triple-digit inflation to seven percent, these policies also produced an unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of a minuscule corporate and industrial elite; in 1990, a little over two percent of the Mexican population controlled 78.55 percent of the nation's wealth.³⁷ In Salinas's Mexico, once again, the historic divisions based on wealth and land ownership, exacerbated by the racial fault line between the white landowners and the Indian peasants, intensified exponentially. And once again, as the chasm between the two Mexicos widened, the warnings from *El Mexico Profundo* fell on deaf ears in the offices of *El Mexico Imaginario*.

Judging from the government's reaction, the little hooded figures who appeared on the streets of San Cristobal de las Casas on New Year's Night might have been aliens, dropping in on the NAFTA celebrations from some other planet. Yet none of the self-evident causes of the rebellion — the misery, the hunger, the repression, the utter neglect and abandonment of the Maya Indian communities of Chiapas — was news to anyone. Interviewed just days after the insurrection, Chiapaneco playwright Carlos Olmos told *Proceso* magazine that "absolutely nobody in Chiapas was unaware of the situation of marginalization and poverty in which the Indians have been living forever. . . . It has been an open secret that there were guerrillas in Chiapas. Peace in Chiapas has been a sham for centuries."³⁸

37. Moguel, "Salinas's Failed War on Poverty."

38. Hector Rivera, "Solucion politica, no el uso de la fuerza militar, clama el dramaturgo Carlos Olmos," *El Proceso*, 10 January 1994.

Detailed information concerning the gravity of the situation in Chiapas was, of course, available to the government from Church, press, and even official sources. In 1986, President Salinas, then Secretary of Planning and the Budget, was a member of a presidential commission to investigate the causes of social and political turmoil in the Lacandon Rainforest. Salinas visited the rainforest and saw the conditions for himself. The Commission's final report, written by a panel of national experts appointed to diagnose the root causes of social injustice and conflict in the region, faults the very same political and economic policies that, eight years later, were denounced by the Zapatistas. Perhaps most startling, the report's recommendations mirror, point for point, the basic Zapatista demands. Yet as president, only two years later, Carlos Salinas shelved this report and chose to ignore its findings and recommendations.³⁹

The existence of guerrillas in Chiapas was also known by the government, by members of President Salinas's cabinet, by the president himself, and by the Mexican Army. In March 1993, on an official visit to Ocosingo, President Salinas was petitioned, in person, by the leaders of the local Cattlemen's Association, who pleaded with him for government intervention to deal with guerrillas training in the mountains just beyond the town.⁴⁰ Two months later, just seven months before the Zapatistas seized San Cristobal and three other towns in the region, the Mexican Army accidentally stumbled on a Zapatista training camp.⁴¹ According to news reports at the time, troops from out-of-state sealed all the access roads into the rainforest, ransacked villages, and arrested and tortured non-Zapatista peasants.⁴² Yet after three weeks, when the army withdrew to barracks, the Commander of the 7th Military Region announced that "there are no guerrillas in Chiapas"; the state attorney general added that anyone who challenged this assertion was simply seeking to damage Mexico's image.⁴³

After the revolt, it was widely reported and accepted, both in Mexico and abroad, that the government's failure to forestall the uprising resulted from Salinas's decision to avoid engaging in a counter-insurgency campaign while the U.S. Congress debated NAFTA. This understandable reluctance to scuttle the image of modern Mexico does not, however, explain the government's refusal to address the festering misery and mounting frustration in Chiapas. Given the president's desire to present Mexico as an attractive economic partner,

39. Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Manuel Camacho and Absalon Castellanos knew, in detail, in 1986, the situation which led to the explosion in Chiapas. They took part in the National Commission on the *Selva Lacandona*. Report by Carlos Acosta Cordova, *El Proceso*, 14 March 1994.

40. Francisco Lopez Ardinez, President of the Ocosingo Cattlemen's Association, interviewed by Elio Enriquez, *La Jornada*, 27 May 1993.

41. "On Wednesday May 26th, at 8:00 o'clock in the morning, there was a tremendous confrontation in the mountains, and later we listened to the bombs, and from time to time the soldiers dropped by parachute; it was like paper raining down or buzzards." Arnulfo Cruz, Mayor of Altamirano, interview in *La Jornada*, 1 June 1993.

42. "The eight peasants they've arrested are innocent. If they were guerrillas they wouldn't be so stupid to go to their houses, they'd have fled. . . ." Lazaro Hernandez, spokesman for the Union de Uniones, interview in *La Jornada*, 1 and 2 June 1993. See also Ramon Vera, "Relaciones Peligrosas," *Ojaresca*, July 1993; and Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights.

43. Joaquin Armendariz Cea, quoted in *La Jornada*, 11 July 1993.

why did Salinas not try to defuse the Zapatistas' discontent before it reached a critical mass? Why didn't the government, looking to its own self-interest, foresee that Indian discontent could threaten its economic plan?

The answer is that, in the neo-liberal worldview of Mexico's leaders, poverty is not seen as a threat. Addressing Chiapaneco political and business leaders on a brief visit to the state at the end of January, President Salinas told them: "It is truly mistaken to associate poverty and need with violence. If that were the case, one-third of humanity would be up in arms today. . . . There is no correlation between scarcity and violence. That is why we point out that this is not an indigenous insurrection."⁴⁴ As long as the macroeconomic indicators remained healthy, the president and his team of young Harvard- and Yale-educated economists were too busy stoking the transformation of the Mexican economy to assess the social effects of their policies on the people who had to pay the price for the tight fiscal controls, the closures of state owned businesses (according to government statistics, 1,150,000 people lost their jobs in 1993),⁴⁵ or the cancellations of subsidies to poor farmers. As they drove Mexico down the fast track toward ratification of NAFTA, the Mexican political and economic elite shared certain sanguine convictions. They believed that revolution was an anachronism, that modern Mexico had outgrown the era when peasants and Indians would rise up against the state to challenge the status quo. They also saw political reform as unnecessary; Mexicans were apathetic, would put up with anything, and would always vote for the PRI.

So when the government deregulated coffee prices in 1989, and the price of coffee beans fell by 50 percent in a single year, the government's answer to the economic dislocation in Chiapas was to cut subsidies and disband the only state agency that provided marketing and technical assistance to small growers. In a single year, the Indians' domestic market share fell from 16 percent to 3.4 percent.⁴⁶ In 1991, when required to institute radical reforms in the agricultural sector in order to qualify for NAFTA and meet the World Bank's terms for a \$300,000,000 development loan, President Salinas terminated Mexico's traditional system of land tenure, the cherished legacy of the Mexican Revolution. In 1989 the president had declared that the "essential condition for achieving the modernization of rural Chiapas is the direct participation of the peasants as the protagonists of their own reality."⁴⁷ Yet in 1992, he removed existing restrictions on the size of the large estates and abolished the *Ejido* Law in order to clear the way for privatization of the land and thus allow national and foreign agribusiness to grow cash crops for export. The establishment of the *ejidos* was "the most

44. Speech by President Salinas in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas, on 17 January 1994.

45. Statistics from The Bank of Mexico and The Ministry of Labor, reported in *El Proceso*, 11 April 1994.

46. Author's interview in Mexico City with Luis Hernandez Navarro, Advisor to the National Coordinating Committee of Coffee Cooperatives (CNOCC) and researcher at the Center for the Study of Change in the Mexican Countryside (CECCAM), 22 January 1994.

47. Address of President Carlos Salinas on taking office, December 1988.

intimate reason and supreme goal of the revolution,"⁴⁸ according to Zapata. It was his belief that future generations of Indian peasant farmers should be protected "in perpetuity" that had led him to insist on the inalienability of *ejido* lands in Article 27 of the Mexican 1917 Constitution.⁴⁹

For the Indians, who were never consulted, these constitutional changes represented a betrayal of the Mexican state's most sacred pact with its indigenous and rural population and with the nation's own revolutionary past. They understood NAFTA to signify the destruction of their way of life and recognized that in the new "modern" Mexico, forces beyond their control had determined that subsistence farming, the basis of Indian society, was to be eradicated. The Indians and their traditional world had become obsolete. Under-Secretary of Agriculture Luis Tellez had said as much when he stated that the traditional forms of land tenure were blocking progress in rural Mexico, and that it was the government's intention to drain thirteen million Indian farmers away from the land by the end of the century.⁵⁰ NAFTA, after all, was about more than exports. Because Mexico's NAFTA partners were depending on the rapid growth of an internal market, the transformation of self-sustaining subsistence farmers into dependent wage-earning consumers was a necessary next step in the modernization process. The Indians would provide the cheap labor that would attract foreign capital, either for the new corporate landowners or for the fertile, irrigated cornfields in the north.

When dissenting voices from the grassroots did reach the Presidential Palace, they were ignored. It was said that Jose Cordoba Montoya, the president's chief of staff and closest advisor, dismissed reports of Indian rage and despair: "Indians bark," he reportedly said. "They don't bite."⁵¹ As director of Internal National Security, Mr. Cordoba had ample means to know about Indian concerns. Yet neither he nor any one else in a position of authority ever questioned the ability of the Army and rural police force — with help from the landowners' paramilitaries — to control Chiapaneco dissidents. The government believed that the Indians and the peasants could be pacified with strategic handouts. The president would launch "a war on poverty."

So the Indians got rhetoric: "Never again will the Indian population be treated as second class Mexicans," President Salinas declared at a National Conference of Ethnic Groups in Chiapas in September 1991, on the occasion of the announcement of the National Solidarity campaign.⁵² In a classic example of the PRI's custom of governing "behind the mask of the revolution,"⁵³ Salinas congratulated the PRI bosses of the corrupt, official peasant syndicates for their support of his amendments to Article 27, cloaking himself in the mantle of

48. Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*.

49. *Ibid.*

50. David Barkin, *The Specter of Rural Development*, NACLA Report on the Americas, Spring 1994.

51. Author's interview with (anonymous) former "insider" source, Mexico City, January 1994.

52. Speech by President Salinas in Chiapas, 9 September 1991.

53. Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

Emiliano Zapata. "Today," he told them, "for your honesty, for the uprightness of your principles, and above all, for your real and true commitment to the men of the countryside, you are worthy heirs of Zapata. . . . We [the PRI] assume Zapata's legacy as an example, an inspiration, and a summons to action."⁵⁴ In Chiapas, however, the Solidarity funds, channeled by corrupt local officials and political bosses to loyal PRI voters only, never reached the hardest-hit Indian communities in the eastern rainforest; repression as usual drove hundreds of young Indians into the ranks of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. On the day the Zapatistas declared war on the government the official version of events was shattered. "This revolution is a summons," said Subcomandante Marcos, giving notice that the imminent demise of Mexico's Indians and peasants should not be taken for granted — "a call to the world to pay attention."

The discovery that it was *Los Olvidados*, the Maya Indians from the forgotten villages of the Lacandon Rainforest in Chiapas, who had taken up arms shook the president and his cabinet colleagues to the core. When the president unleashed the Mexican Army with orders to "capture the leaders" and "eliminate the problem,"⁵⁵ the Indian/peasant army's strategy of surprise attacks followed by rapid withdrawals that melted into the civilian population, made a mockery of the army's attempts to encircle and crush them. With only limited ammunition, several thousand poorly armed, under-nourished young Indian men and women launched no fewer than eight frontal attacks in as many consecutive days on the largest military base in the state and drove 12,000 heavily armed troops backed with tanks, armored cars, rocket-firing helicopters and fighter planes, onto the defensive. For ten days the National Army was reduced to resorting to the humiliating spectacle of shelling the hills of Chiapas.

After twelve days, the threat of a violent upheaval at home and the realization that the images from Chiapas were playing to an international audience — especially to Mexico's new NAFTA partners — had made the price of sustaining the offensive unbearable. Yet the true message of the rebellion had still not reached the government. In the Presidential Palace, experts determined that whatever the true origins of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation might be, it was not Indian. The government's descriptions of the rebel force changed from "a couple of hundred transgressors of the law" to "a professional, violent, and well trained extremist organization" whose leaders were Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, or some other variant of the "left-over mercenaries of the exhausted Central American conflicts of the eighties."⁵⁶ It appeared that the Mexican elite's opinion of the Indians had changed little from a description sent

54. President Salinas, speaking in the Presidential Palace, Los Pinos, 1 December 1991, to 250 representatives of official peasant organizations who came to express their support for the amendments to Article 27.

55. Author's interview; see note 51.

56. "Chiapas: La Guerra de los Olvidados, Suplemento Especial," *Sintesis*; and Anne Marie Mergier, "Chiapas is not an indigenous uprising, Salinas assures the wealthy in Switzerland": Report from the Economic World Forum in Davos, Switzerland," *El Proceso*, 7 February 1994.

by the Mexican Consul to the Spanish Court in 1711: "Lazy and lethargic, stupid by nature, without talent for invention or ability for thought, drunken, lecherous, insensitive to religious truths, with no respect for the duties owed to society."⁵⁷ To the fury of the Zapatista leaders, the government claimed that the guerilla army was led by "professionals of violence with radical ideologies," while the rebels' "Indian component" was dismissed as naive, manipulated young "cannon fodder" for their cynical "foreign comandantes."⁵⁸

By the time the shooting war stopped, the television cameras and reporters had broadcast the images and statistics of misery in Mexico's forgotten south far and wide. The international media, whose glowing reports had promoted Salinas's "Mexican Miracle" as a regional blueprint for Latin America's emerging democracies, finally began to ask the tough questions that cast doubt on the nature and progress of Mexico's development. They woke a new generation of grassroots activists in Mexican society from "the long and lazy dream that 'modernity' imposes on everyone and everything."⁵⁹ When they did so, "they realized," says Jorge Castenada, "that the fundamental national problems so many people thought had been dealt with — inequality, injustice, lack of democracy — had never been resolved at all."⁶⁰

Overnight it seemed, the "local conflict in four small municipalities of Chiapas"⁶¹ had ignited a national debate on neoliberal economics, agrarian policies, indigenous rights, Mexican racism and democracy. Above all, as modern, white Mexico was forced to confront traditional, Indian Mexico, the debate increasingly focused on the nation's tormented identification with the sixty-five year-old political system of the ruling state party, raising profound questions about its future stability and reliability as an economic partner. "This country today," said the writer Carlos Montemayor, "is a sounding box of political tensions. Historically, the rural areas have always been the launching pad for political change because of the particular national characteristic of the Mexicans, especially of the Indians, who regard the land as a living entity. . . . In Mexico, we can't play around with the land, or pretend that it's a chemically inert property that can change ownership without affecting the deepest fibers of traditional Mexico. Chiapas represents the most urgent warning Mexico has known, a reminder that there exists a traditional population which cannot be ignored as we move into the new century."⁶²

57. Quoted in Bonfil Batalla, *Mexico Profundo*.

58. Interview with Bishop Aguirre Franco of Tuxla Gutierrez, *La Jornada*, 4 January 1994; see also report from the Ministry of the Interior, 7 January 1994, and various announcements by President Carlos Salinas.

59. Communiqué from Subcomandante Marcos to the Mexican Press, 20 January 1994.

60. Homero Campa, "Omision deliberada o ineptitud del gobierno ante la evidente existancia de la guerrilla: Jorge G. Castaneda?" *El Proceso*, 10 January 1994.

61. Carlos Salinas, speaking to the leaders of the Economic World Forum in Davos, Switzerland, 29 January 1994.

62. Pascal Beltran del Rio, "Inalcanzable, la solucion militar: la capacidad del EZLN muestra que cuenta con el apoyo de incontables comunidades: Carlos Montemayor," *El Proceso*, 10 January 1994.

Conversations in the Cathedral

The EZLN came to this dialogue in the true spirit of being heard and explaining all the reasons that obliged us to take up arms so as not to die an undignified death. . . . We encountered attentive ears that were willing to hear the truth. . . . The dialogue of San Cristobal was real. There were no tricks or lies. There was no buying or selling of dignities. Now that we have a response that reflects the sincere interest of the gentleman commissioned as Peace Envoy, it is our obligation to reflect well on what his words say. We must now speak to the collective heart that commands us. We must listen to its voice in order to start again; from them, from our people, from the indigent people in the mountains and canyons, will come the decision on the next step to take along this road whose destiny will, or will not, be peace with justice and dignity.

*Juan, a member of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee,
at the conclusion of the Dialogue for Peace and Reconciliation,
2 March 1994.*

It was a sunny day in February when the Zapatista leaders returned to San Cristobal to talk about peace. The town where the war had begun, Peace Commissioner Manuel Camacho Solis had said, should be where the messages of peace would first be heard.

The Zapatista leaders' thirty-four point agenda for the talks ranged from basic demands for roads, schools, hospitals, electrification, to fundamental political issues: Indian autonomy nation-wide; the reversal of the amendments to Article 27 and a return to the spirit of Emiliano Zapata's land legislation; a revision of NAFTA, to take account of Indian realities; guaranteed prices and markets for agricultural products; a new penal code for Chiapas; and the recognition of the EZLN as a belligerent force. The demand for democracy, expressed as a call for the resignation of the president and the formation of a transitional government to precede elections, was not on the table in San Cristobal, but it nevertheless remained at the center of the Zapatista agenda. By the time the Zapatistas arrived for the talks, their romance with the grassroots activists in Mexican society had reached the most exhilarating expression of their as yet untested alliance. "The entire country is changing thanks to the Indian communities of the rainforest in Chiapas, and this change can reach unimaginable dimensions," wrote a national columnist just days before the talks began.⁶³ Before coming, the Zapatista leaders wrote to Mexican non-governmental organizations (NGOs): "We see in you the future to which we aspire, a future in which the civil society, with the strength of their integrity, will make not only our army, but also all other armies unnecessary . . . a future in which,

63. Luis Javier Garrido, writing on "The Change," in *La Jornada*, 11 February 1994.

whatever the political tendencies of the government in power, it will have to be responsible to the constant vigilance of a truly free and democratic citizenry."⁶⁴

Encouraged by the prevailing sense that the PRI was crumbling, there existed an irrationally optimistic belief that civil society, the amorphous coalition of many small, disparate groups, organized around concrete local issues, could be transformed overnight into a national mass movement, capable of moving into the political space created by the rebellion. While Manuel Camacho and Bishop Ruiz were secluded behind closed doors, negotiating with the collective leadership of the CCRI, Marcos pursued a separate, parallel strategy. Within the cavernous interior of the Cathedral, he lobbied delegations from all over the country, striving to mobilize a mass movement behind the fundamental demand for democracy that Salinas had excluded from the talks. Marcos's message to everyone who trooped in to see him was consistent with everything he had been saying since the ceasefire: "We know our limits. . . . We don't see the armed struggle in the classic sense of all the previous guerrillas, that is, as the one and only way forward, as the only all-powerful truth around which everything else is subordinated. . . . We're not saying: Here is how we believe the country should be and we'll shoot anyone who doesn't agree with our views. And we can't solve all the problems of Mexico. What we're saying is: Let's make a deal to create a democratic space. If our program wins out in that space, fine. . . . If not, let someone else's [program] win. What matters is that the space does not exist."⁶⁵ But for Mexico's white, middle-class, professional groups, it was one thing to passively support the Zapatistas and quite another to mobilize behind an overt challenge to the legitimacy of the PRI government. Put to the test, the alliance faltered. Marcos blamed himself for asking too much: "It was too big a thing to expect," he said of his failure to inspire mass mobilization behind the demand for Salinas's resignation and the creation of a transition government to dismantle the links between the PRI and the government.

When the talks ended, the tentative peace plan which the Indian leaders took back with them to submit to the villagers included an explicit admission that, all previous denials to the contrary, the agrarian laws in Chiapas had indeed never been complied with; the government now promised to investigate the large estates and re-distribute the illegally held land to the Indians. The government avoided the two central demands — the return to the original Article 27 legislation and full political autonomy for the indigenous population. Instead, it offered a new Indigenous Bill of Rights, which recognized community practices and customs but did not meet the Zapatista demand that the state relinquish its political and judicial authority in the indigenous regions. The new Indigenous Law also contained provisions to address the land issue, but these were only applicable in the state of Chiapas. The 1992 amendments to Article

64. Letter of the CCRI and Marcos to Mexican NGOs, thanking them for providing security for the peace talks, published in *La Jornada*, 1 March 1994.

65. Subcomandante Marcos in interviews with radio reporters in San Cristobal, 22 February 1994.

27 and the agricultural economic reform policies all remained intact. It was not enough to persuade the Indians to put down their guns. Nevertheless, there was a real sense that progress towards "peace with justice and dignity" had been made. Relationships of trust had been forged between Camacho and the Indian leaders; "if Camacho is not sincere then he deserves an Oscar," Marcos told the press. Juan, the spokesman for the CCRI, also spoke warmly of Camacho and especially of the Bishop and his team; they mediated, he said, "not in the middle of war and peace, but in the middle of two voices who are trying, still, to find each other. If some tranquility blossoms in these lands," he said, "it will be due, above all, to their peacemaking work." The mood in San Cristobal, when the Zapatistas left to consult the villagers, was full of hope.

Three weeks later, the villages of the rainforest were in the middle of their consultations when Luis Donald Colosio was assassinated in Tijuana. Overnight, Mexico became a different country. President Salinas again imposed the PRI's replacement candidate by personal fiat. At the edge of the rainforest, ranchers shot and killed a member of the Clandestine Committee on his way to harvest his beans. March is the planting season, and throughout Chiapas, landless peasants, unwilling to wait for the government to act on its promises, began invading and seizing hundreds of thousands of acres of disputed lands; in the rainforest the consultations were put on hold, as the Zapatista Army, anticipating a military attack, went on red alert. The new climate of fear fed into the old mistrust; the communities of the rainforest believed that the Indians had once again been offered only promises by the same people who had never kept their word in the past. It was June before the Zapatistas announced the result of the village consultations: 97.88 percent of the Indians had voted to reject the government's offer.⁶⁶ The San Cristobal Dialogue was dead.

A Revolution in Transition?

The revolutionary change in Mexico will not follow a strict timetable. It could be a hurricane, which erupts after a certain period of accumulation, or it could be a series of struggles on several fronts, with different levels of participation and commitment in which, gradually, the counter-forces will be defeated. . . . It will not be led and guided by a caudillo figure, but by a plurality of forces, in which the dominant force will change. Always, however, gravitating around a single common theme: the triptych of democracy, liberty and justice, on which the new Mexico will rest. If not, there will be no Mexico.

Communiq e from Marcos and the CCRI, 20 January 1994.

In post-Zapatista Mexico, everything has changed yet nothing has changed. "The Indians arrived," wrote Roger Bartra, "to give a lesson in modernity . . . to

66. "The EZLN Says No," response from the CCRI to the government's peace proposals, 10 June 1994.

the technocrats piloting the ship of Mexican authoritarianism and put in question the national identity and legitimacy of the political system."⁶⁷ Even in the center of the ruling party, the Zapatista revolt has precipitated a struggle around the urgent need to reform a system whose internal contradictions are tearing it apart.

Yet when the rebellion was only a few hours old, Marcos told a reporter that the rebels were far more interested in the reaction of the Mexican people to the revolt than in the response of the government. "We hope," he said, "that our action will move something in the national conscience. Not just at the level of armed struggle, but at all levels. We hope to put an end to this masked dictatorship."⁶⁸ In fact, public support for the Zapatista cause exceeded all their expectations. In January, it was public opinion that forced the government to call off the war, just when the Mexican Army had gained the upper hand and were poised to invade and occupy the rainforest in pursuit of the retreating EZLN troops. In February, it compelled the Zapatista leaders to attend the peace talks before they were ready to cope with a radically altered social and political landscape.

Since the predictable breakdown of those talks, President Salinas's pragmatism has isolated the Indians from a majority of their middle-class supporters, especially since the August election, when the PRI machine once again confounded its opponents and the Mexican left proceeded to disintegrate. Yet while support for the rebellion has diminished nationally and a campaign to portray the Zapatista leaders as intransigent radicals threatens to prepare the ground for a possible military solution to the crisis, Mexico's rulers are still searching for an adequate response to the turmoil detonated by the Zapatista challenge throughout the rural south.

In Chiapas, the Indian population of almost one million Indians has begun to seize land, block roads and occupy schools and municipal offices in support of the revolt. Forced to act as an occupation force, the army has emerged from its barracks to police the state's towns and roads in order to protect the interests of the Chiapas establishment. The military has increasingly been involved in serious human rights abuses,⁶⁹ raising the possibility that it seeks to provoke

67. Roger Bartra, in the Literary Supplement of the Sunday *La Jornada*, from an address presented on 29 June 1994.

68. Interview with Subcomandante Marcos by a reporter for the Italian newspaper *L'Unita* in San Cristobal, 1 January 1994.

69. "Implacable testimony: the Army responsible for the arrest, torture, disappearance and death of the three Indians from the *ejido* of Morelia," *El Proceso*, 21 February 1994; "The International Commission of Jurists, Physicians of the World, and Human Rights Watch, evaluate the activities of the Army in Chiapas," *El Proceso*, 28 February 1994. Also Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, "CRITIQUE: Review of Department of State's Report on Human Rights Practices (Mexico)" takes issue with DoS reporting on the Conflict in Chiapas, noting that "Mexican and international human rights organizations have documented summary executions, torture, forced disappearances and unlawful detentions by Mexico's security forces. . . . The egregious human rights violations committed by the security forces in Chiapas are consistent with previously documented violations in Chiapas and other parts of the country." Accusations of human rights violations have also been made against the Zapatistas: violence and intimidation against non-Zapatista civilians within the rainforest has been reported and admitted by the leadership.

the EZLN to retaliate and so legitimize a scorched earth campaign in the rainforest. Meanwhile, several private armies, shock troops for the Chiapas *contras*, are reportedly being armed and trained in the state's capital.

Yet even as the specter of ungovernability and disintegration into a disastrous bloody civil war casts a shadow over the future of Chiapas, the Zapatistas' will to resist remains steadfast. Their unanimous rejection of the government's proposals in June stems as much from the unsatisfactory content of those proposals as it does from the rebels' assessment that the federal government, as presently constituted, is not in a position to deliver even on the partial reforms offered. "The federal government's limited capacity to follow through on its offers . . . characterizes the [PRI] political system," wrote Marcos in June. "This system . . . of complicity with the omnipotent power of the cattle ranchers and businessmen and the penetration of drug traffic . . . makes it possible for [them] to stay in power. . . . The single party system . . . cannot affect these sectors without attacking itself, and it cannot leave things as they are without provoking an increase in the belligerence of peasants and indigenous people. In sum: The fulfillment of the commitments implies, necessarily, the death of the state party system. . . . There is no solution to the problems of Chiapas separate from a solution to the problems of Mexico."⁷⁰

This analysis sustains the Zapatistas' dedication to their revolutionary agenda — their insistence on a dismantling of the links between the PRI and the government and the formation of a government of transition to achieve full democracy, as well as the specific goals of the indigenous peasant population. Nevertheless, the Zapatistas have repeatedly asserted that they will not break the ceasefire unless they are attacked. In August, at a National Democratic Convention sponsored by the Zapatistas and attended by five thousand delegates of grassroots groups from across the nation, the Zapatista leaders entrusted the pursuit of their national agenda to civil society. "Hope had its finger on the trigger at the beginning of the year. Now it is crucial to wait," Marcos said as he handed over the Mexican flag to the president of the Convention — a seventy-five-year-old mother of a student who was "disappeared" by the army and a twenty-year veteran of the struggle for human rights. "The flag is now in the hands of those who have name and face, of good and honest people who travel by routes that are not ours, but whose goal is the same one we yearn for. . . . We hope they carry that flag to the place where it ought to be. We will be waiting. . . . If that flag falls, we will know how to raise it again."⁷¹

On March 2, Manuel Camacho said of the peace plan he had just finished negotiating with the Zapatista leaders, "deep changes have been proposed to make the yearnings of Indian communities for justice and dignity compatible

Invitations have been extended by Marcos and the CCRI to Mexican independent human rights organizations to come to the rainforest to investigate. Also see Physicians for Human Rights and Americas Watch, *Waiting for Justice in Chiapas* (1994).

70. CCRI General Command of the EZLN, "Second Declaration from the Lacandon Rainforest," June 1994.

71. Speech by Subcomandante Marcos to the delegates of the First National Democratic Convention in the Lacandon Rainforest, 8 August 1994.

with the modernization of the country."⁷² The Zapatistas have replied that these "deep changes" were not enough. When the Zapatistas call for administrative and political autonomy in the indigenous regions, they do not mean token recognition of their traditions, languages or customs. Nor do they mean separatism or establishing reservations, as was done in North America. They seek official recognition of self-government in the Indian territories, at all levels, nationwide: in the villages, the municipalities, and the regions. They want Indian representation in the legislature and Indian governors of each ethnic group to cogovern with the state governors. This demand for decentralized, autonomous political authority was articulated, nearly eighty years ago, by Zapata: "Municipal liberty," he wrote, "is the first and most important of democratic institutions, since nothing is more natural or worthy of respect than the right which the citizens of any settlement have of arranging by themselves the affairs of their common life, and of resolving, as best suits them, the interests and needs of their locality."⁷³ The goal of Indian participation in the political institutions of the state, however, marks a new, ambitious departure, a first step toward a new, multiethnic political culture, capable of addressing the schism between the "two Mexicos" that has haunted Mexican identity since the inception of the state.

The other key demands of the Zapatista program — the restoration of Article 27 and a revision of NAFTA in relation to rural development — entail more profound change at the national level than a simple redistribution of land. The rebellion constitutes the first serious challenge to the neoliberal rural development model, and the Zapatista program calls for a fundamental rethinking of rural economic policies. The alternative community-based model the Zapatistas propose is not new. It derives from existing versions of modern, self-sustaining, ecologically viable development models which are based on preserving the integrity of community life. It is precisely because such development poses a threat to state and federal authorities, whose own policies depend on the perpetuation of a subjugated and cheap Indian workforce, that these organizations have been so brutally repressed. To succeed, the communities require political freedom, access to credits and to technical and commercial support services. At stake for the Indians is their ability to be able to participate fully in the modernization of rural Mexico. This is the essence of the Zapatista agenda. These are the rights, freedoms and opportunities they want for all of Mexico's indigenous peoples.

Whatever the final outcome of the Zapatista revolution, one thing is certain: The Zapatistas and their story will continue to cast a long shadow into the future, stretching far beyond the confines of Chiapas. For this first post-Cold War, post-modern indigenous revolution has held up a mirror to every Latin American country with an indigenous minority, where dangerous fissures and explosive social and economic injustices also coexist side by side with the thriving, modern economies of their elites. The revolutionary communities of

72. Manuel Camacho to Tim Golden of the *New York Times*, San Cristobal, 2 March 1994.

73. Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*.

the Lacandon Rainforest also speak to our own world. In the era of the global village, they speak of the need for recognition of different cultures and different dreams. They have also sounded the alarm about the nature and the impact of the economic imperatives that dominate the "new world order" from East to West and North to South, wherever national policies are driven by global markets and wherever money talks louder to governments than the people they represent.

