

Before the Storm: The Ideological Origins and  
Development of Zapatismo, 1960-1994

By Christopher Gunderson

Hello. It's a pleasure to speak here today and I'd like to thank the Bildner Center for organizing this event. My name is Christopher Gunderson and the title of my paper is "Before the Storm: The Ideological Origins and Development of Zapatismo, 1960-1994." It is a condensed presentation of some of the research for my dissertation, which is an historical sociological investigation into the geneology of the distinctive politics of the Zapatista National Liberation Army or EZLN. The discourses and practices that constitute these politics are commonly referred to as Neo-Zapatismo to distinguish them from the politics of General Emiliano Zapata, the leader of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 from whom the modern-day Zapatistas take their name.

My interest in this question has its roots in my experiences in the 1990s as a solidarity activist who moved to Chiapas and spent two years working there coordinating the construction of a medical clinic in a Zapatista community in the Lacandon Jungle and doing human rights observation work. During this time I became increasingly frustrated by the romantic and simplistic accounts of the Zapatistas origins that were widely accepted by most of my fellow solidarity activists, and even more by the dubious lessons that were being drawn from this highly mythologized history by theorists of the then-nascent global justice movement, such as Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, John Holloway and others. Unlike most of my fellows I took it upon

myself to read the often highly tendentious accounts of the Zapatistas pre-1994 history by Tello, Legoretta, Lagrange and Rico and others. While these works filled in some blanks, in their determination to “unmask” the Zapatistas as grubby authoritarian Marxists they fundamentally failed to account for the clearly distinctive nature of the Zapatistas’ politics. My objective then is to develop a comprehensive historical narrative of the origins and development of neo-Zapatismo which I regard as a condition for a proper theoretical treatment of its implications. My presentation today will lay out key points in this historical narrative and present my central conclusion.

## Overview

My presentation is organized as follows: First, I will discuss very briefly what makes the Neo-Zapatismo so distinct, why I believe it is important to explain, and why I have taken the historical approach to the question that I have. The historical narrative then looks at the influence of three successive externally initiated radical political organizing projects on the emergence of the communities as a new political subject in the form first of a broad indigenous campesino movement, and then in the form of a clandestine revolutionary army, the EZLN. First, I look at the training of indigenous catechists by the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, which begins in earnest in the early 1960s and how these catechists went on to become a layer of what I am calling, after Gramsci, “organic indigenous campesino intellectuals.” Second I examine the efforts of the cadres of several Maoist groups with roots in the Mexican student movement of the late 1960s who acted as advisors to a number of mass campesino organizations in Chiapas in the 1970s. Third, I describe the efforts of a small, mainly urban and university educated clandestine political military organization, the Forces of National Liberation or FLN, to establish a guerilla

nucleus in Chiapas, leading ultimately to the creation of the EZLN. Finally I offer my interpretation of the effects of all these experiences on the Zapatistas and how they informed the distinctive politics that emerged largely in the aftermath of the 1994 uprising.

### Neo-Zapatismo

While my research is historical, my purpose is to explain a contemporary phenomena – the highly distinctive politics of neo-Zapatismo.

In the wake of the swift ceasefire and process of negotiations that followed the Zapatista uprising, the EZLN developed a political discourse and practice that sharply distinguished it from other Latin American revolutionary guerrilla movements. Rejecting the orthodox Marxist-Leninist discourse of class struggle, vanguard parties, and the seizure and consolidation of state power, the Zapatistas spoke instead of the mobilization of civil society, promoted more horizontal forms of organization, explicitly rejected the pursuit of state power and demanded autonomy for Mexico's indigenous peoples. When negotiations with the government broke down, rather than returning to armed struggle, the Zapatistas first organized thirty plus self-governing autonomous municipalities and later five regional Good Government Councils (Juntas de Buen Gobierno) that function as a counter-power to the official governing structures of the Mexican state in the areas of significant Zapatista influence.

The distinctive political discourse and practices of the EZLN have been a major source of inspiration for the global justice movement that emerged in the late 1990s and that captured international attention with the disruptive protests at the World Trade Organization ministerial in Seattle in 1999. Within this broader movement the Zapatistas have been held up as a model of a new kind of radical anti-capitalist politics that breaks decisively with the supposedly exhausted

organizational forms and strategies associated with the socialist and communist left of the 20th century. In this view the autonomous village, municipal and regional structures of self-governance built up by the Zapatistas represent an alternative to the model of a revolutionary vanguard party seizing state power and carrying out a socialist reorganization of society from above. A critical element in this understanding of the Zapatistas is what I characterize as a mythologized history of their origins that has been repeated with variations in several EZLN communiqués and in interviews with their spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos. The central feature of this story is what Marcos call “the EZLN’s first defeat.” In this narrative, the EZLN was established in the Lacandon Jungle by a small nucleus of orthodox Marxist-Leninist guerrillas who were forced to abandon their dogmatic views by the indigenous communities that they initially imagined themselves leading.

The problem with this account is not so much that it is false, as the Zapatistas critics have argued, but that it is incomplete and one-dimensional. While it credits the agency of the indigenous communities it does so in an ahistorical manner that effectively erases a whole process through which the indigenous had constituted themselves as a new collective political subject. As one of the Zapatistas critics pointedly notes:

“In effect , the Forces of National Liberation did not find a fragmented, disorganized, and extremely impoverished people. They found, rather, a cohesive and organized region with a certain political experience and aspirations to improve their living conditions that had been dignified by their organizational process; moreover the legacy of a dynamic of real appropriation and participation on the part of the base, that is to say where the communities had been compelled in the solution of their own problems.” (188-189)

The problem for Legoretta and company is that this recognition is fundamentally at odds with her larger claim that the indigenous communities were essentially manipulated into

participation in the uprising by the machinations of the FLN's ladino leadership, in particular Marcos.

What I am arguing here is that what accounts for the distinctive politics of the EZLN is the existence of a developed indigenous leadership that had become quite adept in resisting the efforts of outside actors to direct their movement, and that in excavating the historical development of that leadership group both before and after the founding of the EZLN by the FLN in 1983, we arrive at a greatly enriched appreciation of the significance of neo-Zapatismo.

### Training Catechists

Between the early 1950s and the 1994 Zapatista uprising the indigenous communities of Chiapas underwent a profound and complex collective process of religious awakening, radicalization and political organization. From the early 1950s to 1968, the Diocese of San Cristóbal, first under Bishop Lucio Torreblanca and after 1960 under Bishop Samuel Ruiz, undertook a process of training indigenous catechists within a larger framework of missionary activity in the indigenous communities of the Diocese. While this process became progressively more systematic and intensive, especially after the opening of two schools for catechists in 1962, the content and methods of this training remained essentially traditional and conservative.

Beginning in 1968, however, the Diocese experienced a profound upheaval as the traditional content and methods of catechist formation were subjected to a radical critique by both the pastoral agents and the indigenous catechists alike and then completely reorganized. This period culminated in the organization of the 1974 Indigenous Congress in San Cristóbal de las Casas which was followed shortly thereafter by the formal commitment of the Diocese to "the preferential option for the poor" and to the building of a genuinely autochthonous church.

The catechist movement had a very basic structure. Catechists, mainly in their teens and early twenties, were trained by and met regularly with the pastoral staff and then returned to their communities where they led small circles of the faithful. The movement spread as much by the initiative of the catechists themselves as by the efforts of the quite meager pastoral staff of the Diocese. Catechists would identify promising candidates for training in their own or in neighboring villages and then propose them to the pastoral staff. The greatest obstacle to the growth of the movement in this early period was the lack of pastoral staff able to meet the demand for continuous training.

In 1958, 60 students attended the first organized course for indigenous catechists. By 1968 over 700 catechists had been trained. The process of building up and reorganizing the Diocese, the intellectual ferment generated by Vatican II, and the accumulated experience of contact with the conditions of life in the indigenous communities had set the stage for a radical rupture in the form and content of the training of indigenous catechists by the Diocese.

This process of transformation in which the catechists and their communities emerged decisively as subjects of their own history characterizes the whole period from 1968 through 1974. It began with critical comments by some catechists in the course of an evaluation of the Diocese's pastoral practice in 1968 and culminated in the organization of the Indigenous Congress in 1974 in which over a thousand delegates representing virtually all of the indigenous communities in the Diocese came together for the first time to articulate a common set of grievances and a program for their resolution.

In preparation for the Congress, the Diocese systematically organized village and regional assemblies to discuss their problems, ensuring that the presentations of the delegates at the Congress reflected the collective experience of their respective communities. To facilitate

this process the Diocese brought in as advisors to the communities, members of a Maoist organization, Union del Pueblo (UP), that had previous experience in organizing popular assemblies, and who were charged with the training of indigenous translators who would be responsible for the translation between the indigenous languages and Spanish. (Garcia de Leon 2002:166-170)

The catechists that the Diocese had trained played a critical role in the organization of the Congress. Responsible for the organization of the assemblies in their respective communities and often chosen as delegates, the preparations for the Congress saw the consolidation of the catechists as leaders of their communities. The process of catechist training itself meant that the catechists had a greater familiarity with and more systematic understanding of the conditions in other communities in their region. Combined with their greater exposure to the critical social and political analyses circulating among the pastoral staff, this made them uniquely qualified to articulate an analysis of their common plight and of the necessity of common action that would resonate with and be embraced by their communities.

### The Mass Line

The period following the Indigenous Congress was characterized by the intensive organization of the indigenous communities into a variety of mass campesino organizations affiliated with an assortment of radical left-wing political groups. During this period the catechists trained by the Diocese emerged decisively as leaders of their communities. This phase saw its conclusion in 1983 with a generalized crisis within the movement as the mass organizations proved unable to effectively respond to intensifying repression, cooptation, the

effects of the Mexican debt crisis and the resulting turn on the part of the Mexican state towards neo-liberal policies of austerity.

Among the many left-wing groups that sought to relate to the emerging indigenous-campesino movement, the most successful were several Maoist organizations. The first of these groups was Unión del Pueblo, several of whose members had assisted in the organization of the Indigenous Congress and who participated in the organization of Quiptik Te Lecubtesel, the first of several unions of ejidos that would go on to constitute the Union de Uniones, the largest campesino organization in Chiapas. They would be joined shortly thereafter by, and would almost immediately merge with another Maoist group, Linea Proletaria.

The Maoists applied a method of organization and leadership that they called “the mass line” that emphasized rooting themselves in oppressed communities and cultivating the political and organizational capacities of the people in those communities rather than the more sectarian practices of many of the other left-wing groups. Central to this method was a continual process of political education and training and the promotion of the use of popular assemblies by the communities. While the communities already had a tradition of using assemblies, these were generally effectively dominated by traditional authorities. The Maoists promoted their democratization through the inclusion of women and youth. The Maoists methods achieved considerable organizational success and left a significant mark on the political culture of the indigenous campesino movement, and consequently I would argue, also on the political practices of the Zapatistas that have come to be associated with their vision of indigenous autonomy.

By 1983, however, implausible though this may sound, the leadership of the Linea Proletaria was increasingly aligned with the fraction of the ruling party, the PRI, under the

leadership of Carlos Salinas, and this put them in increasing conflict with both the Diocese of San Cristóbal and the communities that were moving in an increasingly radical direction. In the spring of 1983 the Maoist advisers were expelled from the communities.

### Path of Fire

The final chapter of my story begins with the implantation in the Lacandon Jungle in November 1983 of the nucleus of what would become the EZLN and is characterized by the fusion of much of the indigenous-campesino movement, particularly in the *Cañadas* region of the Lacandon Jungle, with the EZLN's political-military project, a process in which the indigenous catechists trained by the Diocese would again play a pivotal role.

The founding nucleus of the EZLN consisted of a small group of both mestizo and indigenous members of the FLN. The FLN was established in 1969 in Monterrey and over the course of the 1970s built itself up as a nationwide clandestine political military organization. Unlike other mainly urban guerilla groups of this period, that were notorious for bank robberies, kidnappings and bombings the FLN pursued a strategy of the slow and patient accumulation of forces. They made several failed attempts to establish themselves in Chiapas until in the late 1970s they were able to recruit a leading activist, known as Poncho, from the community of Lazaro Cardenas in the Northern Zone, an area that had experienced particularly bloody conflicts, sometimes involving federal troops.

Poncho in turn recruited a cohort of very young family members who moved into the FLN's urban safe houses where they underwent an intense process of political education and military training over several years before they entered the Lacandon Jungle and established the EZLN. Over the course of the rest of the 1980s, as this initial nucleus grew and began to make

contact with and recruit from the communities in the canyons of the Lacandon Jungle, again utilizing family networks, the community leaders they would make contact with were precisely the catechists and former catechists who had been trained first by the Diocese and then by the Maoists.

## Conclusion

What is most distinctive about the politics of the EZLN is the radical reconception of the proper relationship between revolutionary leadership and the popular base of mass movements. The mythologized history of the origins of the EZLN would suggest that this reconception is rooted primarily in longstanding traditions of the indigenous communities. The history I have reviewed here, however suggests rather that it was the product of much more recent process in which the training of indigenous catechists produced a layer of organic indigenous campesino intellectuals who in turn enabled their communities to constitute themselves as a new political subject in the form of a broad indigenous campesino movement. When that movement found itself thwarted by repression and cooptation, a large fraction embraced the project of building a rebel army. The distinctive politics of the EZLN that would be articulated in the wake of the 1994 uprising draw on multiple sources. These include traditional practices of the indigenous communities, the popular education practices and liberation theology of the Diocese of San Cristóbal, the Marxist political-economic analysis and mass line leadership methods of the Maoists, and the FLN's view that the localized grievances of the indigenous communities could not be satisfactorily resolved without a military confrontation with the Mexican state.

The EZLN is not the caricature of a vertical authoritarian organization portrayed by its critics. Neither however is the libertarian model that many of its sympathizers believe. By

understanding its historical genesis we can see that it is rather a hybrid form of organization in which participatory democratic features coexist with a military command structure. This form draws on various influences but is ultimately a creative response to the contradictory demands of opening up space for autonomous political development and defending those spaces in the face of state repression.