

The Tapestry Of Neo-Zapatismo Origins And Development

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On January 1 1994, the previously unknown Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, or Zapatista National Liberation Army) captured seven cities and towns in the state of Chiapas, Mexico - and with them the imaginations of progressive activists around the world. In the sixteen years since the Zapatista uprising, the Zapatistas' distinctive political discourse and practice, known as 'neo-Zapatismo', has had an enormous influence on the generation of activists identified with the counter-globalisation movement, perhaps especially in the North. Despite this influence however, in our experience the understanding of the actual origins and development of the EZLN and of neo-Zapatismo prior to the 1994 uprising remains limited among both scholars and activists outside of Mexico.

As noted by the neo-Zapatistas as well as by researchers, neo-Zapatismo is the product of a rich and complex convergence and interweaving of several radical political currents or threads with a process of profound social transformation within the indigenous communities of Chiapas.² In this paper we identify the major threads and give an account of how they came to be woven together to make the tapestry that is neo-Zapatismo. What allowed the EZLN's emergence and expansion? What factors converged to give life to the EZLN and to make it different from previous indigenous social and political movements? These questions cannot be properly answered in a single paper. What we do here is to present some elements of their story that we hope will invite readers to hear the voices that are to be found in the extensive body of materials documenting the neo-Zapatistas' own words and work³ - as well as the web pages and blog spots cited below.

I

Situated and Committed Knowledge

We are two scholar-activists who have been inspired by the Zapatista experience who hope that this presentation on the roots of that experience might be a small contribution to the debates and discussions that our South Asian colleagues and compañeros have

been pursuing around emerging global movements. We dedicate it to the Zapatista compañeros and compañeras who are the reason and inspiration for the international Zapatista solidarity networks of which we are part.

Xochitl is a scholar and activist who first came to work in the Lacandon Jungle in 1987, seven years before the 1994 uprising, unaware that one of the most important movements in Chiapas, Mexico, Abya Yala (the Americas) and the world was being built there clandestinely at the very same time. 1987 was not just any year in the history of the EZLN. It was rather the beginning of the period that lasted until 1990 when the EZLN grew very rapidly taking in most of the communities in Las Cañadas region of the Lacandon Jungle. Since 1994 Xochitl has not only written about the neo-Zapatista networks but also contributed to building them.

Christopher is an activist turned scholar who threw himself into Zapatista solidarity work within days of the Zapatista uprising. He travelled to Chiapas first in 1996 for the First Intercontinental Encounter Against Neoliberalism and for Humanity organised by the EZLN, then spent two years from 1997 to 1999 working on the construction of a clinic in a Zapatista community, after a year of research under Xochitl's supervision, he completed his dissertation on the intellectual origins and development of Zapatismo prior to the 1994 uprising and is presently an Assistant Professor in Sociology at Howard University in Washington, DC.⁴

II

The Beginning, in the Zapatistas' Own Words

Neo-Zapatismo can be divided into two parts : The military neo-Zapatismo of the EZLN proper and the civil neo-Zapatismo of the several hundred indigenous villages that are the EZLN's support bases.⁵ The villages are in turn organised into 38 'autonomous municipalities', which in turn are organised into five regional Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Good Government Councils, or JBGs). If you want to know the civil neo-Zapatismo of the indigenous neo-Zapatista communities, the place to start is in the five neo-Zapatista Caracoles, the seats of the JBGs, composed of rotating delegates from the autonomous municipalities that govern on the basis of the principle of mandar obedeciendo ('to lead, obeying'). The JBGs operate year round administering justice, coordinating the work of various autonomous councils and committees of the region, and acting as the point of contact between the neo-Zapatista communities and the world, receiving those who wish to learn the history and demands of the movement or who want to aid the movement.

The JBGs and the Caracoles took shape in 2003 and made the neo-Zapatistas' regional autonomy real in the wake of the failure of the national government in 2001 to carry out the reforms promised in the San Andres Accords that the EZLN and the Mexican government signed in 1996.⁶ They reflect a privileging of the non-violent civil and political dimensions of the neo-Zapatistas' struggle over the military dimension. While the

military dimension has not disappeared, and the EZLN has retained their weapons and political-military organisation, the emphasis on the development of the communities' capacities for political self-governance has, for the present, pushed it into the background.

The term 'caracol', which refers to the spiral shape of a conch or snail shell, has several significances. First, it is a symbol with pre-Columbian Mayan-Mesoamerican roots. Conch shells are used in many communities to call people to village assemblies and spiral shaped processions are used ritualistically to symbolise the coming together of the whole community. The spiral image also stands in contrast with more linear categories of space and time rooted in the West and in modernity. Neo-Zapatismo is a movement that seems to move in a spiral fashion weaving together processes that occur in different times and spaces. And like a snail, from the perspective of non-indigenous observers, it often moves very slowly.

If the neo-Zapatistas captured the world's attention in 1994 and have since inspired many counter-globalisation activists with their experiments in autonomy, the question still remains, where did this movement come from ?

It is well known that the EZLN is composed mainly of indigenous people and was founded on November 17 1983, in the Lacandon Jungle in Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico.⁷ A neo-Zapatista corrido or ballad, titled 'Anniversary of November 17th' tells how :

... History has forgotten our step forward ...

how the forces were organized ...

to live for our country or to all die for freedom...

We fight for an end to exploitation,

and to be done forever with the moneybags and the boss...

We want good food and housing for all,

work, health, and peace,

independence and education.

We want to live liberation...

The members of the Revolutionary Indigenous Clandestine Committee (CCRI) tell us of the EZLN's origins :

First we decided to take possession of the land, and then on the path to get there. That is how the organization of campesinos began. The moment came when we had to strike, protesting and shouting out our demands. We were tired of being turned back, of putting so much in but never seeing a solution to anything. We had to make them respect us. Then the moment came in which we had to take up arms so that we would be heard. We came to this in secret while we struggled publicly, marching side by side with the legal organizations.⁸

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, the spokesman of the EZLN, tells how a small group of indigenous and non-indigenous members of the FLN arrived in one of the most inhospitable parts of the Lacandon Jungle to establish a guerrilla encampment and how gradually they began to make contact with the leaders of the indigenous communities in the region.⁹ Members of the CCRI emphasise how the EZLN was transformed from a peasant self-defence organisation into a regular army as members of the communities began to join in large numbers. They tell how the communities themselves passed through times of great stress and division as some wondered if preparing for armed struggle was right or wrong,¹⁰ but as Captain Elisa, a Tseltal officer in the EZLN, said in 1994 :

Nobody wants to become an insurgent, but with this situation we have to make the effort and endure it so that the people can have what they need. We have seen many times how people organized themselves for marches, for sit-ins, without anything ever being solved. That is why we thought it better to take up arms. And this is why we have to be in the mountains, suffering and enduring all the shit we go through, if the officer says you need to march through the night, withstand the cold sleep, rain...¹¹

The decisions, first to go into the mountains and to build an army, and then to launch the uprising that captured the attention of the world, were each the product of long and complex processes of political development on the part of the indigenous communities of Chiapas. When the EZLN was founded in 1983 it was done in secrecy because the broader indigenous-campesino movement was then both facing murderous repression and also grappling with the exhaustion of dealing with reformist strategies. Given this, the communities were initially attracted by the EZLN's offers to train and organise them for armed self-defence. By the early 1990s however, the organisation had grown dramatically and a series of events (the collapse of coffee prices, the reversal of land reform guarantees in the Constitution, the quincentenary in 1992 of Columbus's initiation of the conquest of the Americas, and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, in 1993, with its profound consequences for the peoples of Mexico) convinced most of its members that the time had come to go to war. In 1992 the communities began to vote in assemblies on whether or not to declare war. By early 1993 the decision was made and the preparations begun. By the end of the year roughly five thousand well-armed guerrilla insurgents and less well-armed members of village militias was in position and the uprising was launched on January 1 1994.

III

Neo-Zapatista Threads

As suggested above, neo-Zapatismo is the product of the weaving together of several distinct threads. In our view the seven main threads are as follows :

1. The indigenous philosophy of the komon and the lekil kuxlejal (or 'the full life') as a horizon of life, expressed in the efforts to build what the Zapatistas call 'good governance' and the commitment to mandar obedeciendo ('to lead, obeying').
2. The traditions of indigenous rebellions dating back to the colonial era.

3. The Zapatismo of the Mexican Revolution of the early 20th century.
4. Liberation Theology, the 'preferential option for the poor', and Indigenous Theology, as developed within the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.
5. The distinctly Mexican brand of Maoism that played a critical role in the development of independent campesino organisations in Chiapas.
6. The independent campesino movement that arose in Chiapas and Mexico in the 1970s and 80s, and in particular the fight against government policies aimed at evicting communities in Las Cañadas region of the Lacandon Jungle.
7. The broad national liberation movement that arose in Mexico in the 1960s and specifically the National Liberation Forces (FLN), an originally urban clandestine political-military organisation that formally initiated the EZLN in 1983.

These seven threads were mainly woven together in Las Cañadas, the canyons region of the Lacandon Jungle, a remote area settled in recent decades mainly by Mayan Indians fleeing intense competition for scarce lands, the repressive regime of the fincas,¹² and religious conflicts in other regions of Chiapas. It was in this micro-region that the guerrilla nucleus established by the FLN in 1983 germinated and became the core of the peoples' army that rose up in 1994. As it grew in secret, the EZLN also expanded into the Highlands and Northern Zone, areas characterised by their own particular dynamics. It was in Las Cañadas, however, that the EZLN won the broadest support, and this paper will concentrate its attentions on the process there, not least of all because it is the one we know best.

The paper is organised as follows : First, we look at each of the seven threads identified above, one by one. Second, as the paper progresses we chart their interweaving in order to more fully comprehend the EZLN and to understand its local, national, and global resonance.

IV

The First Thread : From the Komon to 'Good Governance'

The heartland of the EZLN is the Lacandon Jungle. In pre-Hispanic times, its inhabitants were the original Lacandon Indians, who were ultimately exterminated by the Spanish colonisers in retaliation for their fierce resistance. The Province of Chiapa then became a part of the Audiencia of Guatemala "directly subject to the King of Spain and not to the Viceroy of New Spain".¹³ In 1821 the ladino¹⁴ elites of the Guatemalan provinces of Chiapa and Soconusco declared independence from Spain and Guatemala and joined the newly formed Mexican Empire. In the 19th century, and mainly under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, different logging companies based in Tabasco, Guatemala, Mexico City, the United States, England, Spain, and France laid claim to large tracts of jungle in order to extract mahogany and other precious woods for shipment from ports located in the Gulf of Mexico to London, Liverpool, and New York. This situation prevailed until 1949.¹⁵

When Xochitl came to work in the Lacandon Jungle in 1987, the large timber companies of the Porfirian era were long gone. What remained were the names of the old logging camps taken for the new villages that had been established by settlers colonising the jungle. The settlers – in this case, indigenous and mestizo peoples, and not referring to the colonists - who had occupied Las Cañadas over the course of the 19th and 20th

centuries had moved from the colonial haciendas established by Dominican friars that ringed the jungle to the privately owned fincas of the ladino elite, and finally to the ejidos, a form of communal property re-established by the 1910 Mexican Revolution. These settlers had come in waves, occupying different sub-regions of the Lacandon Jungle each of which had its own history of occupation.¹⁶

But if we look only at Las Cañadas, which between 1987 and 1990 was almost entirely affiliated with the EZLN, we know from a census organised by ARIC Union de Uniones, the main legal campesino organisation, that 80% of the inhabitants of that sub-region came from neighbouring ladino-owned fincas.¹⁷ We also know from other sources that, between 1910 and 1950, the fraction of people in the region living on the fincas fell from 84% to 53%.¹⁸ Based on oral history, in 1996 Xochitl Leyva and Gabriel Ascencio identified several "cycles of colonization in Las Cañadas" in which, starting in the 1930s, new indigenous and mestizo settlers cleared lands to found a community and raise their families, and then saw their children settle another piece of virgin forest.¹⁹ The resulting dense web of family connections between the communities would later serve to facilitate the clandestine growth of what the communities simply called "the organization" (or the EZLN).

The finca was an immediate historical and political reference point for the people in Las Cañadas. For many of the founders of the ejidos, their parents and grandparents had been peons exploited by large landowners on fincas dedicated to agricultural production based on cheap labour and the monopolisation of land. Today, when speaking of their liberation, both young and old in the EZLN begin with the time of the fincas. In testimonies collected by neo-Zapatista videographers, for example, one says :

When I was with my patron I could not work my milpa (corn field). If someone wanted corn they had to get it from the big house, the company store, the same went for beans, salt and sugar. With every celebration of All Saints Day we also got a set of clothes, a pair of pants and a shirt, and women's clothing, depending on what you wore. Which was why you could never pay the debt, and why at the end of each year your debt increased and you could not pay and you had to stay... But the amount of corn didn't change. 'It's very little', we would tell the patron, and he would say to us 'Don't bitch that you don't get more, it's a zonte between two, even though they ate much more...'

(Fragment taken from the video Chul stes bil [The Sacred Earth], 2000).

In 1990, in a village in Las Cañadas, one community agreed to reconstruct with Xochitl Leyva and Gabriel Ascencio the history of their arrival in the jungle. The four elders appointed by the community assembly to tell the story made a strong emphasis on heavy labours from dawn until dusk, on eternal debts that tied them forever to the finca, on never having had the opportunity to learn to read and write, and on the suffering endured to leave the finca and to find a piece of land in the inhospitable jungle.²⁰ This kind of collective memory of grievances became one of the strongholds of the neo-Zapatista claims after 1994.

The communities established by the settlers fleeing the fincas organised themselves in

accordance with the indigenous culture and values that they had kept alive and resignified over the course of centuries. Sometimes the process of resignification happened even inside the fincas. Lekil kuxlejal and the komon are the specific forms that were developed in the Lacandon Jungle, which are similar to the concepts respectively of sumak kawsay among the Quechuas and Aymaras of Bolivia and of comunalidad among the Mixes of Oaxaca, in Mexico. The Zapatistas of today are thus not the only ones to have this worldview, but what is their own is the way in which they have elaborated it into the political philosophy of mandar obedeciendo ('to lead, obeying').

One of the most relevant local and cultural institutions was the komon. Perhaps the most remote antecedent of the komon is the común de tierras or common lands granted to the Indians by the Spanish crown; or it may also come from a pre-Columbian form of social organisation. We do not know precisely, but what we do know is that the komon was reinforced by the Mexican government's post-revolutionary agrarian reform insofar as the reform promoted the formation of ejidos, which in turn encouraged collective forms of organisation and use of lands.

By the end of the 1980s, the Mayan Indians²¹ used the term komon to refer both to the Council of Authorities that governed each village in a spirit of community service and to the collective way of life in which religious rituals were celebrated together, and where land, cattle, and sugar cane were worked in common. As well, decisions concerning almost every aspect of daily life were made by consensus in village assemblies.²² After the neo-Zapatista uprising the principles of the komon, understood as participatory and radical democracy, would become one of the bases of the Zapatistas' practice of 'good governance'.²³

V

Legacy of Indigenous Rebellions

The neo-Zapatista uprising in January 1994 was not the first indigenous rebellion in Chiapas. Indeed, its distinctive features cannot be understood without reference to the long legacy of indigenous resistance and rebellions against established powers (ie the Spanish Crown, the criollo elite, the finqueros, and the ladinos).

During colonial times, the first major sign of indigenous discontent occurred in 1693 when a revolt broke out in the Zoque town of Tuxtla in the Grijalva Valley, resulting in the deaths of two Spanish officials and the town's highest Indian authority before troops were sent into crush it. Twenty-one Indians were executed for their involvement in the rebellion and their dismembered bodies were displayed around the town and allowed to rot on the grounds that this "would serve as preventive medicine, such that neither present nor future Indians would lose their way".²⁴

In 1712, starting in the Tzeltal town of San Juan Cancuc and spreading to other towns, a

religious movement arose among the Indians of Highland Chiapas with the appearance of the Virgin of Rosario to a fourteen year old girl named María de la Candelaria. The movement took on the character of a rebellion with the appearance in Cancuc of Sebastián Gómez de la Gloria, a native of Chenalhó, who "transformed the cult of the virgin into a real church".²⁵ In early August 1712 leaders of all the Indian towns of Chiapas were called by Sebastián Gómez to come to Cancuc and to bring with them "all the silver of your churches, and the ornaments and bells, with all the coffers and drums and all the *cofradía*²⁶ books and funds".²⁷ The response to the call was overwhelming. With the exception of four towns, the entire Province of the Zendalees responded to the call, as did many towns in the Tzotzil districts of Las Coronas y Chinampas in the Central Highlands.

Sebastián Gómez was putting in place a kind of indigenous theocratic dual power. He promoted a rapid break with Spanish colonial authority by replacing every significant office of Spanish power - civil, religious, or military - with a new indigenous authority. Under Gómez's leadership an indigenista theology was constructed that appropriated the narrative and symbolism of the Catholic Church but transformed them into instruments of indigenous power. Not only were religious vestments appropriated, but the very geography of the region was reconceived. Ciudad Real (the colonial capital) was renamed 'Jerusalem' and Cancuc was renamed 'Ciudad Real', presumably establishing the basis for a crusade to retake the city from the Spaniards who were declared to be "Jews" and therefore "barred from salvation".

The indigenous army was organised along Spanish lines.²⁸ In less than a week after a call to rise up in arms the indigenous peoples had "secured control of all the villages of the Province of the Zendalees and the *Gaurdianía* of Huitiupán, with the solitary exceptions of Simojovel and Los Plátanos", and "by August 25 an Indian army of four to five thousand men had reached San Miguel Huixtán, a Tzotzil town within striking distance (six leagues) of Ciudad Real, and were preparing to attack it".²⁹ The attack was never made however, and eventually the Spanish authorities regained the offensive and reconquered Cancuc in late November 1712, though 'mopping up' operations continued for another seven months.³⁰

Between 1867 and 1869 the Highlands of Chiapas were shaken again, this time by a series of events that became popularly known as the 'Caste War'³¹ of Chamula.³² In December 1867, a girl from the Tzotzil village of Tzajalhemel in the municipality of Chamula claimed to have found three stones that fell from the sky. The stones became the objects of a cult that obtained the approval of Pedro Díaz Cuscat, a high-ranking indigenous official from Chamula who performed religious functions when the ladino priest was absent. Cuscat interpreted the sounds of the stones as they banged against the inside of a box in which they had been placed. The stones were later replaced with clay figurines, the girl was declared 'the Mother of God', and by April 1868 "Tzajalhemel

was transformed from an insignificant place to a regional socioreligious and commercial centre".³³ The transformation of the village into a major market struck at one of the main mechanisms by which the ladino elite extracted wealth from the indigenous peoples of the Highlands.

By the end of 1868, the authorities of San Cristóbal de Las Casas assembled 50 troops who marched on Tzajalhemel, trashed the temple, seized the figurines, and took the girl prisoner. Díaz Cuscat and several of his followers were arrested a little later after the soldiers opened fire on an unarmed crowd that was attempting to defend them. In June 1869, Miguel Martínez, the Catholic priest serving Chamula, and three others were killed in the course of an attempt to seize a new set of the figurines which had replaced the old ones. The killings were followed by several others of ladino ranchers and merchants and were attributed to Ignacio Fernández Galindo, a ladino anarchist schoolteacher who was accused of organising an indigenous army to attack San Cristóbal.

At this point, interpretations of events diverge. Several thousand Chamulans marched on San Cristóbal, but instead of launching an attack, Galindo, his wife, and a student offered themselves as hostages in exchange for Cuscat. The exchange was accepted, but the authorities in San Cristóbal then broke the deal by arresting the three hostages and charging them with treason. According to Jan Rus (1998) the Chamulans posted six hundred men armed with digging sticks and machetes on the road from San Cristóbal in anticipation of reprisals while other accounts describe this as a larger offensive force gathered with the intent to lay siege and then attack the city. What is clear is that the liberal governor mobilised lowland militias which marched on San Cristóbal and attacked the Chamulans, killing 300. According to Rus, the 43 ladinos killed were largely the victims of 'friendly' artillery fire.³⁴

The ladinos waited several days to gather more forces before attacking Chamula directly, where there is little doubt that what then occurred was a massacre. Over the next several months the militia continued to carry out operations against people variously described as rebels or refugees. Rus correctly challenges the ladino justifications of these massacres as a response to a supposed 'caste war' waged by the Chamulans against the ladino population. However, in organising their own church, their own market, and ultimately their own security forces, the Chamulans had struck at three pillars of ladino power over them.

These indigenous Mayan rebellions (and others that happened nearly at the same time in other parts of the Mayan region³⁵) left marks in the collective memories of both the ladino and the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. On one side, it created fear and resentment. For instance, on January 1 1994 it was very common to hear in the streets of San Cristobal "The indigenous people are coming again!". On the other, in the collective indigenous memory resentment was mixed up with a new hope for justice, autonomy, and liberation. These elements played an important role in the development of the

EZLN's national and international struggles.

VI

The Third Thread : The Mexican Revolution and the Zapatistas

Neo-Zapatismo is influenced by the 1910 Mexican Revolution in several distinct ways, and not only in the name. The figure of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional's namesake, Emiliano Zapata, represents both a vision of agrarian reform and a practice of rural guerrilla warfare to secure it that remain important elements in the politics of the current neo-Zapatistas. The revolution that exploded in the centre and north of the country in opposition to the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, came late to Chiapas, but when it came it followed a course distinct from the rest of the country.

In Chiapas, the landowners attempted to put themselves at the head of the movement and to maintain control over their workers whom they promised some of their lands if they would fight at their side. Thus the revolution fought under the slogan of 'Land and Freedom' was limited in much of Chiapas. It was only as a result of the land reform set in motion in the 1940s by the followers of President Lázaro Cárdenas that the agrarian and political panorama of the state really came to be modified with the formation of ejidos, unions, and campesino organisations. Most of these, however, would become part of the apparatus of the official party, the Party of the Institutionalised Revolution (PRI) that governed the country for more than 70 years until it was ousted in the presidential elections of 2000. Rather than displacing the old landed oligarchy, the revolution had armed them with a new mechanism of control over the indigenous communities that - until the 1990s - was able to exercise absolute control over the electoral process in Chiapas through the corporatist cooptation of leaders, organisations, and movements. At the same time the revolution had legally enshrined principles of agrarian reform that even when they were ignored by the state, served to legitimise the land struggles of the communities.

The term Zapatista is central to the EZLN because the EZLN disputes the appropriation of the values, the imaginary, and the agrarian revolutionary guerrilla heroes by those in power - the government and the post-revolutionary nation state -, and reclaims the heritage of this popular struggle. As part and parcel of its declaration of war against the 'bad government' in Mexico and its struggle against neoliberalism embodied in the Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the EZLN has recovered the Zapatista slogan 'Land and Freedom' and with it the struggle for land that

... acquires the value of a symbol of resistance against the dispossession of the communities' capacity for self-determination. At the same time, it constitutes the medium for a community spirit, that is, for what binds people together.³⁶

The neo-Zapatistas have a history of community construction that we have already briefly examined here with the example of the komon. But they also have a history of struggle against finqueros, understood and experienced as big ladino landowners. These two

elements were already present in the Zapatismo of the early 20th century, and they also shaped the symbolic construction of neo-Zapatismo on a national level, not only in the Lacandon Jungle but across Mexico. These historic references are widely known by all Mexicans, and through them the neo-Zapatistas are understood to be

... reaffirming their membership in the group of the historically defeated, los de abajo (the ones from the bottom) of Mexican history, and not another group ... [But] history [say the neo-Zapatistas] can be inverted ... [and transform itself] in an initiative whose meaning is hope ... so that dignity and rebellion turn into liberty and dignity ...³⁷.

But beyond the mythical popular hero Emiliano Zapata, there are also other elements of the Mexican revolution that are present in neo-Zapatismo, for example, the production of corridos (folk songs) and mural painting. But let us close this section with the words of the neo-Zapatistas themselves who outlined in the Primera Declaración de la Selva Lacandona (The First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle) the historic continuities that provide them with their symbolic, civil, and political strength :

... We are the product of 500 years of struggle : First against slavery, in the War of Independence against Spain headed by the Insurgents; then in order to avoid being absorbed by US expansionism; after that to enact our Constitution and expel the French Empire from our soil. Then Porfiro Díaz's dictatorship denied us the just application of the Reform Laws and so the people rebelled and formed their own leaders. That is how Villa and Zapata arose, both of them poor people like ourselves ...³⁸

Another aspect of the Mexican revolution was its anti-clericalism, which took on a particularly sharp form in Chiapas where the Catholic Church, already greatly weakened by the dispossession of its lands and the expulsion of the Dominicans and other religious orders in the 19th century, was made the object of intense persecution, culminating in attacks on churches, the burning of icons and the expulsion of the Bishop and remaining priests to Guatemala until 1944. This had two important consequences. The first was that responsibility for the maintenance of the faith was left entirely to laity, whether indigenous or ladino, reinforcing already strong tendencies towards autonomy in religious practice vis-à-vis the church hierarchy. The second was to establish a pattern of profound distrust between the State and the Church. This distrust would later encourage the Diocese in its embrace of more radical and oppositional politics that would allow, at the end of the 20th Century, the growth of radical left-wing movements in Chiapas and the Lacandon Jungle.

VII

The Word of God

Between the early 1950s and 1994 the indigenous communities of Chiapas underwent a profound and complex collective process of religious awakening, radicalisation, and political organisation. From the early 1950s to 1968, the Diocese of San Cristóbal undertook a process of training indigenous catechists – religious instructors - within a larger framework of missionary activity in the indigenous communities of the Diocese. This process became progressively more systematic and intensive over time, under two

successive Bishops.

While the methods and content of earlier catechist instruction had been very traditional, the renewed missionary orientation broke with prior parish practice by encouraging the missionaries to travel out of the cities and large towns and to establish closer contact with the villages.³⁹ In spite of the crude methods and meagre resources, the catechist movement took on a life of its own and soon spread from Tenejapa to the municipalities of Oxchuc, Huixtán, and Chanal.

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 scanty pastoral staff of the Diocese. Catechists would identify promising candidates for training in their own or in neighbouring 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 1960 Bishop Lucio Torreblanca was replaced by the young new Bishop Samuel Ruiz García. Under Ruiz's leadership, the training and organisation of indigenous catechists would become the cornerstone of the pastoral practice of the Diocese for the next forty years. In the first eight years of Ruiz's tenure he methodically transformed the Diocese he had inherited, reducing its size, enlarging its staff, and decentralising its governance, all with an eye towards deepening its missionary work in the often remote indigenous communities.⁴⁰

During this period the training of catechists was conducted largely as it had been under Torreblanca. While the training of catechists was expanded and systematised, the content of the courses remained highly traditional as did the methods of instruction.⁴¹ The attitude of the pastoral staff towards the indigenous communities and their culture was generally patronising. The traditional religious practices of the communities were regarded as largely heretical and an obstacle to their economic improvement which was to be achieved, in Ruiz's words, by "teaching them Spanish, putting shoes on their feet, and improving their diets".⁴² In spite of the appearance of continuity in practice, however, the thinking of the Bishop and of the pastoral staff of the Diocese was undergoing an important evolution under the simultaneous influence of its increasingly close contact with the lives of the indigenous communities and the upheavals within the larger Church associated with the Second Vatican Council.⁴³

As Iribarren argues :

The motor of the evolution of the Diocese ... was the contact with the indigenous and campesino communities, the contemplation of their situation of permanent conflict, the humiliation and poverty of their lives, and the unanticipated events that demanded rapid discernment. This was creating within

Another important aspect of the currents of change during this period was that the pastoral staff was also greatly enlarged under Ruiz, with the invitation of various orders of the church to take up responsibility for missionary work in several parishes responsible for large portions of the Diocese. In 1962, the Diocese established two schools for indigenous catechists in San Cristóbal, one for men, to be run by the Marists, and the other for women, to be run by the Sisters of the Divine Shepherd.⁴⁵ The Marists would establish another centre shortly thereafter in the city of Comitán, and in 1963 the Dominicans were invited to establish the Mission of Ocosingo-Altamirano. Building on the missions already established in Tenejapa and Bachajón, Ruiz was putting in place the organisational means to extend the catechist movement to the whole of the Diocese.⁴⁶ Ruiz enjoyed the support of the larger church in all of this because he was, in effect, rebuilding the Diocese that had been dismantled in the 1930s.

By 1968 the process of building up and reorganising 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.⁴⁷ Importantly, by 1968 the Diocese had trained 700 indigenous catechists in Chiapas on whom the church now depended to carry out its pastoral work.⁴⁸ In that year the Diocese undertook a review of their work during which indigenous elders expressed their frustration with the church's concern for their souls when their bodies were suffering.

This process of transformation in which the catechists and their communities emerged decisively as subjects of their own history characterises the whole period from 1968 through 1974.⁴⁹ It begins with critical comments by some catechists in the course of an evaluation of the Diocese's pastoral practice in 1968 and culminates in the organisation 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.⁵⁰

In a meeting called by the Ocosingo-Altamirano Mission's pastoral team in November 1971, the catechists challenged the traditional hierarchical methods of instruction associated with the idea of an instructor, or *nopteswanejetic* in Tzeltal, and advanced in its place the idea of a *tiwanej*, or facilitator. Leyva describes this conversion from

... *nopteswanej* in which everybody listens without further participation, to *tiwanej*, in which the catechist, on the presumption that the members of the community had 'the word in their hearts,' possessed the inherited wisdom of their elders and needed to communicate it, and further that the wisdom was not only to be found within the elders, but also within the children and the youth.⁵¹

The role of the *nopteswanejetic* was also criticised as an external imposition of the ladino world and a violation of the communities' own traditions of teaching and learning. This

produced a lively discussion leading to the identification of four principles that were to inform the future activity of the team :

1. To respect the cultural identity and social reality of the subjects of the catechesis, or religious instruction;
2. To recognise the presence and value of pre-existing Christian tradition;
3. To encourage the participation of the whole community in the reflection on the Word of God; and -
4. To convert the catechists and pastoral agents from *nopteswanejetic* into *tiwanej* ⁵²

This shift in pedagogical practice would eventually also have profound implications for the social structure of the communities themselves, calling into question traditional patterns of authority and promoting a democratisation of communal life.⁵³ Under its influence the catechists and the pastoral team set out to collectively produce a new catechesis based on discussions in the communities of selected biblical passages and their relevance to the experiences and situation of the communities. The story of Exodus became a central organising metaphor in this process as the majority of communities ministered to by the Mission were themselves the product of recent flight from what they saw as the slavery of the *fincas* and then the settlement in Las Cañadas region of the Lacandon Jungle which they viewed as their own 'promised land'. This new catechesis, published in 1974 as *Estamos buscando la libertad : Los tzeltales de la selva anuncian la Buena nueva* ('We Are Seeking Freedom : The Tzeltales of the Jungle Announce the Good News')⁵⁴ and the collective and communal process of its production, came to have an enormous impact not just on the pastoral practice of the Ocosingo-Altamirano Mission but also on the Diocese and the indigenous communities as a whole. The concept of a 'promised land' and the 'chosen people' allowed the hope of liberation to grow hand in hand with the clandestine armed movement of the EZLN, which we come to in the next section.

A culminating moment in this process of transformation was the 1974 Indigenous Congress, which began as an initiative of the state government of Chiapas to commemorate the quincentenary of the birth of Bartolomé de Las Casas but passed into the effective control of the Diocese by virtue of its privileged access to the indigenous communities. Bishop Ruiz insisted that if the Diocese was to participate that the Congress must enable the indigenous peoples themselves to have a voice and not simply to provide folkloric colour for an otherwise purely commemorative event.⁵⁵ The Congress brought together 1,230 delegates from the indigenous communities across the eastern half of Chiapas to discuss their common problems and would represent the most important historical reference for the broader campesino movement in Chiapas, which would burst forth immediately following the Congress.⁵⁶

VIII

The Fifth Thread : Maoism's Long March in Chiapas

After the celebration of the 1974 Indigenous Congress, several Maoist groups – in particular, *Unión del Pueblo*, *Linea Proletaria*, and the *Organización Revolucionaria Compañero* – would play a significant if highly contradictory role in assisting the

communities to organise themselves politically through political education courses and training in organisational methods that would powerfully inform the distinctive political culture of the EZLN long after many of the Maoists themselves were expelled from many of the communities.

The deadly repression of the Mexican student movement in 1968⁵⁷ produced a generalised turn in the country towards more revolutionary politics and forms of action. Inspired by the Cuban Revolution as well as by the rural guerrilla groups led by Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez in the state of Guerrero, small groups of students across the country formed urban guerrilla groups that captured headlines and became the target of a dirty war. At the same time, a larger fraction of the student movement turned towards Maoism, which in the Mexican context meant, for the most part, an orientation towards the building up of mass formations among campesinos, the urban poor, and industrial workers and not, as in South Asia and elsewhere, the launching of a 'peoples war'.

For the Mexican Maoists the most important element of what its adherents called 'Mao Ze Dong Thought' was the theory of the 'mass line' method of leadership. A concise statement of this theory can be found in Mao's Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership :

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily from the masses, to the masses. This means : Take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time.⁵⁸

The mass line, in other words, is a recognition of the role of the experiences of 'the masses' themselves in the development of the ideas that are to guide the revolutionary movement. It is a rejection of the notion that the revolutionary leadership already has the answers and needs only figure out how to convey them to the masses. The mass line method does not reject the need for revolutionary leadership, but it does radically reconceive it. The role of leadership is thus to assist the masses in clarifying their own understanding of their conditions and the means by which they might be transformed through a continuous process of distilling the most 'advanced' elements out of the contradictory tangle of their ideas about their experiences in the course of their struggles, and then making those the basis for the next round of reflection.

Mexican Maoism had its roots in a series of expulsions and splits from the Mexican Communist Party in the late 1950s that gave rise to several small organisations that aligned themselves with the Chinese Communist Party in the latter's disputes with the Soviet Union, in particular in opposition to the Soviet policy of 'peaceful coexistence' with the West. In the wake of the 1968 student movement, the Mexico City based 'Ho Chi

Minh Section' (or simply 'the Ho') of the largest of these groups, the Liga Comunista Espartacista (LCE, or Spartacist Communist League), began to develop and articulate an application of Maoist ideas to the Mexican political context that would enable them to play an important role in urban and rural popular movements in the 1970s and 80s.

Breaking with the sect-like character of its milieu, the Ho had been able to establish some links with and engage in some mass organising work with "militant workers in small factories in Mexico City, campesino groups in Morelos and Guerrero, and militant teachers in Hidalgo, Tlaxcala, Oaxaca, Guerrero and the valley of Mexico".⁵⁹ The Chinese Cultural Revolution that had begun in 1966 had led the members of the Ho to undertake a new and closer reading of the works of Mao more centred on the practice of the 'mass line' that seemed to point a way out of their previous inability to find a mass base.⁶⁰

The members of the Ho were also affected by the support that had been shown by the urban poor for the student movement in 1968, support that stood in notable contrast with the often hostile stance of industrial workers concentrated in pro-government unions. The combined impact of the ideas emerging from the Cultural Revolution, the sympathy for the students among the urban poor, and critical reflection on their own marginal role in the student movement led the Ho (and others who had undergone similar experiences) to radically reorient their political activity.

It is in this context that we see the emergence of several self-proclaimed Maoist organisations that would play important roles in the burgeoning urban popular movements, in several labour unions, and, in Chiapas, in the indigenous campesino movement. The largest of these groups was Política Popular (PP). Led by Adolfo Orive, the son of an important leader of the ruling PRI and a student of Charles Bettelheim, the student cadres of PP were especially successful in building organisations among the urban poor in their struggles for land, housing, and basic services.

The first Maoist group to arrive in Chiapas however, was Unión del Pueblo (UP – Union of the People), which unlike most of the other Maoist groups did not have its roots in the LCE. Rather, UP had originally been organised as a clandestine urban guerrilla organisation in 1968 that gained notoriety for carrying out bombings. By the early 1970s, however, UP was internally divided with one faction won over to an orientation of patiently building up mass organisations similar to the approach of Política Popular. UP cadres from this faction entered into contact with the indigenous communities of Chiapas in 1973 when a trained linguist working with the Diocese and a secret member of UP himself, brought in young UP members from the University of Chapingo to train multilingual members of the communities as translators for the 1974 Indigenous Congress.⁶¹ The UP cadres included several students originally from Chiapas who proved adept at navigating the state's complex social and political terrain. Whether their decision to work in Chiapas was fortuitous or the result of a coherent strategic plan based in a countrywide analysis is unclear. What is clear is that the Maoists saw in the radicalisation

of the Diocese under the influence of Liberation Theology an opening to build radical mass organisations.

Reflecting their understanding of the Maoist theory of the mass line the cadres of UP, working with the pastoral staff of the Diocese and the catechists, promoted the use of village level and regional popular assemblies to carry out discussions and develop collective analyses of the themes of the Congress. These in turn ensured that the Congress was regarded widely in the communities as a legitimate expression of their collective will.

In the early 1970s, as part of a populist turn intended to restore the damaged legitimacy of the PRI, Mexican President Luis Echeverría called for the creation of unions of ejidos. These were intended to serve as vehicles for reintegrating discontented campesinos back into the apparatus of the PRI, but the call created an opening to build the first such ejidal union in the Lacandon Jungle, La Union de Ejidos Quiptic Ta Lekubtesel (the last three words being Tsel'tal for 'Our force for progress'). Not surprisingly the village based leadership of Quiptic included many of the catechists who had been trained by the diocese, but who had also now been trained as political organisers by UP.

In 1976, another Maoist organisation the Linea Proletaria (LP), a split from Política Popular, was invited by the Diocese to send cadres to work in the communities of eastern Chiapas. Until then LP had been active mainly in the urban popular movement and in the labour movement in several cities in Northern Mexico.⁶² This invitation was undoubtedly facilitated by members of UP already working with the Diocese who were eager to develop a closer working relationship with LP. Indeed, within a few months of the arrival of LP cadres in Chiapas, the two organisations had fused.

The thoughts and tactics that Maoists brought with them, interweaving with the local ideology of the *komon* and with the ideas of Liberation Theology, had a profound impact on the communities of the Lacandon Jungle and beyond. The Maoists trained leaders in at least 200 indigenous communities as political thinkers and organisers, many of whom would go on to play important roles in the development of the EZLN. While the Maoists had much in common with the political orientation of the Diocese they also came into competition with the church for influence within the communities. Importantly, while many villages would only see a priest once or twice a year, the Maoists immersed themselves in the daily lives of the communities in which they lived. Their visible commitment to the poor coupled with their often explicit atheism undermined the authority of the church hierarchy. The growth of the ejidal unions and the concomitant growth in the influence of the Maoists however ultimately precipitated a breakdown in the working relationship between the diocese and the Maoist advisors living in the communities.

The problem came to a head in 1978 when the advisors associated with UP with the deepest roots in the communities participated in an 'exchange of experiences' with LP by

moving to Monterrey (in northern Mexico) to participate in LP's work among the urban poor while LP brigadistas arrived in the communities to take their places. The newly arrived LP brigadistas began to articulate a critique of the ways in which the training of indigenous leaders was supposedly reinforcing inequalities and authoritarianism within the communities. Their answer to this problem was an ideological campaign they named "the struggle to the death against social-democracy" in which they challenged the authority exercised in the communities by the catechists and *tuhuneles* (deacons). Not surprisingly, this campaign backfired on the LP brigadistas since, authoritarian or not, the indigenous catechists and *tuhuneles* enjoyed considerable prestige in their own communities whereas the brigadistas were recent arrivals and seen as *ladinos*.

The actual balance of power revealed itself when the villages sided with the catechists and the Diocese and expelled the Maoists who were compelled to walk out of the jungle and prohibited from even visiting communities along the way. The expulsion marked the end of a phase of formal collaboration between the pastoral staff of the Diocese and the Maoists. The two groups, nonetheless, continued to work together, with many ups and downs, until 1994. Meanwhile, the *campesinos* faced common enemies : Governors, *finqueros*, *Lacandones*, and the governmental functionaries promoting the *Brecha*.

IX

The Campesino Movement gets Organised

As already noted, the 1974 Indigenous Congress acted as a major impetus for the building of independent *campesino* organisations on the part of the indigenous communities of eastern Chiapas. At the same time that the government continued to pursue its practices of clientelism, cooptation, and corporatism, more and more independent *campesino* organisations began to openly fight for access to land, for greater government support for the production and marketing of agricultural products, and for election to political office. Thus, *campesino* organisations waged a series of intense struggles in the very areas in which the EZLN would later establish itself, acting independently of the PRI, in some cases affiliated with or advised by members of the Communist Party or Maoist organisations, in others more closely tied to the Diocese, sometimes acting alone and sometimes as part of larger national convergences or alliance. In municipalities like Venustiano Carranza, Simojovel, Palenque, Las Margaritas, and elsewhere, an independent *campesino* movement emerged. In the 1980s members of these organisations would suffer intense political repression at the hands of the state's landed oligarchy and the state government they controlled. This experience of repression encouraged the communities to see the value in developing their own capacity for military self-defence. Ocosingo was not the exception, nor were the indigenous *campesinos* who later founded the EZLN.

While the Diocese and the Maoists gave the communities greater access to political resources that greatly facilitated this process it was the vision and energies of the communities themselves that drove the growth of the new organisations and fuelled the

explosion in militant land and related struggles in the late 1970s and 80s.

Initial efforts to constitute a single unitary organisation proved impossible, undoubtedly reflecting the considerable variation in political conditions between different regions. The efficient cooptation of village leadership that the PRI had been able to achieve in some parts of Chiapas, for example in San Juan Chamula or other Highland communities, was not so easily accomplished in some of the sub-regions of the Lacandon Jungle. This was not only because of the physically inhospitable nature of the jungle itself, but also because of the deliberate lack of state attention to these areas and especially the frustrations involved in obtaining recognition of land titles from the Department of Agrarian Reform.

It was probably, however, the efforts of the government from 1972 onwards to 'restore' land titles to 614,315 hectares in the Lacandon Jungle to 66 Lacandon Maya families, that most effectively promoted the radicalisation of the Tseltal, Tsotsil, Chol, and Tojolabal settlers who lived and worked on much of that land. The Lacandones of the 20th century were commonly misrepresented as the descendants of the original inhabitants who had occupied much of the Jungle prior to their extermination in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. This gave the government's actions the appearance, especially at a distance, of restoring the lands of a conquered people. The truth however, was that by giving the Lacandones title to such extensive lands, the government sought to circumvent altogether the claims of more recently arrived but also more numerous settlers and thereby to facilitate the concession of valuable lumber extraction rights to a parastatal logging company known as COFOLASA.

The conflict between settlers, the Lacandones, and the government soon exploded when the government sent surveyors in order to establish the boundaries of the Brecha, as the lands intended for the Lacandones were known. The Brecha took in lands already occupied, under cultivation, and in various stages of legalisation before the Department of Agrarian Reform. The government's policy provoked demonstrations, marches, and often sharp confrontations, which were in turn met with often violent repression, including the burning of settlers' homes. All this contributed to a radicalisation of the communities that were pursuing a legal resolution of the conflict by means of ejidal unions.

Most of the ejidos that were among the first to join La Union de Ejidos Quiptic Ta Lekubtesel (or 'Quiptic') were among those targeted for eviction from their lands in the Brecha. In 1976, the federal Secretariat for Agrarian Reform carried out the relocation of eight Chol and fifteen Tzeltal communities in compliance with the decree establishing the Lacandon Zone and in order to prevent them from cutting down any more trees intended for extraction by the parastatal logging company. The eviction of these communities however, also had the unintended effect of driving many communities not yet affiliated with Quiptic to join the organisation.

The arrival of Maoist cadres of Línea Proletaria (LP) in 1976, as discussed above, enabled

an acceleration of the process of organising already taking place. An incident involving a more localised land dispute would further consolidate the position of Quiptic. On July 8 1977, an incident involving a struggle for control over La Nueva Providencia (legally organised as an ejido but in reality essentially a finca) precipitated a clash between state police sent in to protect the corrupt leaders of the ejido and members of a Quiptic meeting in a nearby community. When the smoke cleared, six police were dead and their weapons were in the possession of Quiptic (who would however use them only for ceremonial purposes thereafter). The state authorities were compelled by these events to meet the demands of the ejidatarios of La Nueva Providencia, and the reputation of Quiptic as an organisation willing and able to fight and win was established. In this context, Quiptic grew to 75 ejidos and 20 ranches, and another Unión de Ejidos called Lucha Campesina grew to 22 communities. A third ejidal union, the Unión de Ejidos Tierra y Liberta consisting of 31 Ch'ol communities, and three more ejidal unions were also established, drawing in another 44 more communities. The culmination of this process was the merger of the various ejidal unions in 1979 under the umbrella of the Unión de Uniones, an organisation from which the EZLN has subsequently recruited most of its militants since 1983.

The wave of governmental repression in the 1980s would leave many of the political leaders of the independent campesino movement in Chiapas dead or disappeared as the result of the actions of the state and federal police, and of the military as well as the 'white guards' or private security forces paid for by large landowners or rural bosses. At the same time an ethnocidal scorched earth policy on the part of the Guatemalan military against Mayan communities just across the border forced many of them to flee into the Lacandon Jungle.

While Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos notes that the leadership of the unified Guatemalan guerrilla forces (the Unidad Nacional Revolucionaria Guatemalteca or URNG) viewed the EZLN "with great suspicion, criticism and frank animosity",⁶³ the presence of hundreds of university educated middle and upper-class Guatemalan exiles in the cities of Chiapas and of tens of thousands of Mayan campesinos in refugee camps scattered through the Lacandon Jungle would have profound implications for both the organisational form and thinking of the indigenous settlers living in the jungle, many of whom would later joined the clandestine work of the EZLN.

The founding of the EZLN in the Jungle on 17 November 1983 occurred, then, in a very difficult moment : The Guatemalan state was pursuing a genocidal response to its own guerrilla insurgencies while the government of Chiapas was actively repressing the independent campesino movement in the state. In the face of the guerrilla wars being fought across its southern border in Central America the Mexican government decided to militarise the border, a decision reflected in the selection of Army General Absalón Castellanos Domínguez as governor of Chiapas. At the very same moment, the communities and political organisations operating in Las Cañadas had just emerged from an internal crisis that saw a second expulsion of Maoist advisors who had encouraged the

organisations to pursue a strategy of improving production rather than fighting for land – a strategy that many communities felt had divided and weakened the ejidal unions that were the main independent campesino organisations in the region. The tension between the Maoists and the indigenous communities in the Lacandon Jungle remained alive until the EZLN openly declared war against the Mexican government on January 1 1994. And finally, as we shall see in the next section, the guerrilla groups that emerged in Mexico in the late 1960s and early 1970s were either destroyed or brought above ground with promises of amnesty.

X

The Seventh Thread : The Path of Fire

While the EZLN was formally established in 1983, the efforts to plant a guerrilla force in the Lacandon Jungle began fifteen years earlier. The EZLN was initiated by the National Liberation Forces (FLN) that was itself founded in 1969 in the northern city of Monterrey by a remnant of a very short-lived and poorly conceived attempt to establish a guerrilla group in the Lacandon Jungle under the banner of the Insurgent Mexican Army (Ejército Insurgente Mexicano, EIM).

Motivated by outrage at the massacre of students in 1968 and an egregious electoral fraud in the state of Yucatán, the EIM was inspired by the triumph of the strategy of guerrilla warfare in the Cuban Revolution and sought to reproduce that experience in Mexico. While the initiative came from the Yucatán, the EIM brought together young people from various parts of Mexico, including Monterrey. The EIM undertook the installation of the first guerrilla foco in the Lacandon Jungle, poorly disguised as a group of 'bearded researchers'.

While the EIM quickly collapsed as a result of internal organisational problems, the experience facilitated the subsequent formation of the FLN and taught the founders of the latter the value of a much more patient and deliberate approach to building a clandestine political-military organisation.⁶⁴ It also gave them an appreciation of the strategic potential of Chiapas. State institutions were weak there compared to other areas in Mexico. Furthermore, its proximity to Tabasco where the country is narrowest meant that an insurgency could potentially sever land communications between the Yucatán Peninsula and the rest of Mexico, creating a sizable rear area for guerrilla operations.

The students and professionals who founded the FLN were themselves radicalised through their participation in early and mid-1960s in the broad National Liberation Movement (MLN) inspired by the Cuban Revolution and led by former president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas. While the MLN did not promote a strategy of armed struggle, many of the young activists who would later become guerrilla leaders participated in this formation and shared its perception of the need for a struggle against imperialism and for national sovereignty as a condition for realising a socialist transformation of Mexico.⁶⁵

The founders of the FLN were students of philosophy, law, and medicine. They proposed

to “liberate the country from foreign exploitation and its local representatives” by overthrowing the government, seizing power, and installing a socialist government. As they declared in an internal communiqué on October 8 1971 :

When the FLN are large they will constitute an army of the people to satisfy the peoples hunger for democracy and dignity, and to provide to all those who today are despised and exploited, land, work, and shelter, and make us at last the owners and beneficiaries of our resources, our work and our destiny.⁶⁶

These were years of effervescent enthusiasm for guerrilla warfare inspired by the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959, the apparent advances of armed national liberation struggles across Latin America in Peru, Venezuela, Brazil, and elsewhere, but also by the wave of anti-colonial independence struggles and wars of national liberation in Africa and Asia. In Mexico, those drawn to guerrilla activity were also inspired by their own country’s long history of heroic guerrilla struggles. As Alonso Vargas notes,

As a way of fighting [guerrilla warfare comes from] from the Indians’ resistance to the barbarity of the conquistadors. In the successful campaign in Morelos against the Spanish Crown; in the armed resistance of the Mexican people against the U.S. invasion in 1847; in the fierce support for the Republican Government of Juárez in the face of the French invasion; and in the first offensives of Villa and Zapata against federal forces [in the 1910 Revolution]; up to the armed campesino struggle of Rubén Jaramillo. During the 1960s, the workers and peasants movement was controlled, subordinated and suppressed by governments ... carrying out a policy of complicity with the interests of U.S. power ... against this new form of domination and subjugation of the people arose new guerrilla fighters led by Arturo Gámiz and Pablo Gómez, on 23 September 1965 ... [who] proposed the construction of socialism in Mexico. Thus was born the contemporary armed socialist movement.⁶⁷

In Mexico, members not just of guerrilla movements but of movements of electricians, telegraph operators, oil workers, doctors and nurses, teachers, and railroad workers that began to emerge in the mid-1950s, would become prime targets of the ‘dirty war’ of counter-insurgent violence by the state apparatus which disappeared, tortured, and killed with violence and impunity both leaders and rank and file members of such movements. The ‘dirty war’ was in certain respects a by-product of the cold war that offered a justification for the use of repressive violence for ‘security reasons’ and the strengthening of the authoritarian regime with a view to the ‘threat of communism’.⁶⁸

More than two dozen urban guerrilla groups emerged in the wake of the repression of the student movement in Mexico in 1968. In Monterrey in the northern state of Nuevo León, a struggle against the efforts of the state government and local manufacturers to impose a conservative regime on the university prompted students of the National Polytechnic Institute in Mexico City to protest in support of the demands of students in Monterrey. The ensuing massacre of students by elite Mexican Army troops further radicalised students in Nuevo Leon, driving a fraction to turn to armed struggle. Several other armed groups operated in Monterrey at the same time as the FLN.⁶⁹

By 1972 the FLN had established a presence and was conducting clandestine work in the states of Nuevo León, Puebla, Mexico City, Tabasco, Chihuahua, and Chiapas. In Chiapas they established the Emiliano Zapata Guerrilla Nucleus on a small piece of purchased land

in the Lacandon Jungle. In 1974 the police discovered an FLN safe house in Monterrey which led them to the FLN's headquarters in the town of Nepantla outside Mexico City, which in turn led them to the encampment in the Lacandon Jungle and a two-month long hunt as the guerrilla nucleus fled into the jungle.⁷⁰ The operation was conducted in the brutal manner of the dirty war. Captured FLN members were variously tortured, disappeared, held secretly on military installations, and summarily executed. Conducted with impunity, the operation left a handful of survivors.⁷¹ In spite of this blow, the FLN was able to reconstitute itself. Eventually new militants returned to Chiapas and by 1979 had recruited a small group of indigenous activists from the Northern part of the state. By 1983 were able to plant themselves in the jungle and begin the process of building the people's army they had spoken of in 1971.

With respect to the process of rooting themselves in the jungle and recruiting members of the indigenous communities, Comandante Tacho tells us that he was approached because he already had some political and organisational experience. He tells us that he was first chosen by comrades in the organisation in his region as a representative to go speak with presidents, governors, and military officials to explain the logging, agrarian, and economic problems of his region. With all this experience, the militants of the EZLN sought him out and befriended him. "Then they contacted me, immediately sending somebody from very far away to meet with me".⁷² After this, and convinced of the cause, he began little by little to invite others and to work with the women of the communities, training them as a kind of 'political commissariat' charged with convincing their husbands and other members of the community until whole communities could be integrated into the clandestine structure of the EZLN.

Major Moisés describes how, at an early age, he left his ejido to go to the city to find work and there began to become politically conscious. When he returned to his community he found them waging a strike for land and struggling to obtain a truck to take the agricultural produce of their community from the jungle to the market. Little by little, Major Moisés realised that there were outsiders in the jungle whom at first he thought were tourists. Shortly later, however, a young man came to talk with him :

We began to speak of the poverty, the injustice, the misery... and that the people needed to organize themselves. I had already thought about this, and so I told him : "Well, there isn't really a good solution to this struggle we are in". But we didn't know any better and that is when the guy inquired : "But would you be ready ?". So I told him : "I need you to tell me more, so that I know what it is about". And then he told me clearly that he was talking about a guerrilla group called the Zapatista Army and that they were clandestine. And then he explained to me the questions of security.⁷³

Convinced of the cause, Major Moisés says he met with a group of seven men in the community in order that they might all join, and then took on the work of supplying provisions for the clandestine organisation from the city while at the same time learning to read and write. Later the organisation sent him to conduct recruitment work in factories and, finally in 1985, he went up into the mountains to become a guerrilla.

XI

Concluding Remarks : Weaving the Word

We started with two basic ideas : That of a caracol (snail) and of a tapestry. We conceive of both as metaphors of the grammar and symbolisms of the neo-Zapatistas. The caracol can be understood as the structuring foundation of life in the communities, as the collective voice of a politically constructed 'us' with a Mayan Mesoamerican root.⁷⁴ The caracol can also be understood as a structuring foundation of neo-Zapatista text, above all of its written communiqués that are "elaborated via circumvolution" in which the speaker (speaking subject) selects the space of the detour in which both reality as well as an imaginary trip are captured. That means a constant return to the origin, indeed a multiple origin, that functions both as the site of an anchorage for the struggle, as well as its legitimisation. It is also a mythological, literary, and political origin of an unfinished history.⁷⁵

By way of these two metaphors (of the caracol and of the tapestry) we have attempted to weave a kind of interwoven text with the genealogical threads of neo-Zapatismo. Unfortunately, these threads are not known in depth, not even by many of the followers of neo-Zapatismo.⁷⁶ We believe that without an understanding of the historical roots of this stance in traditions of indigenous self-governance in the Mexican political experience of the 1970s and in the particular conditions confronting the indigenous-campesino movement in Chiapas and Mexico, it is impossible to seriously discuss what neo-Zapatismo is about.

We do not pretend however, to have been able to identify here what is of universal significance for counter-systemic movements in neo-Zapatismo, or even what is particular to Chiapas or Mexico. In any case, most likely such claims would be sharply contested anyway. Instead, what we have chosen to do is to present an account of the genealogy of neo-Zapatismo the meanings and implications of which can perhaps both continue to unfold and to interweave, over time, in the hope that this can contribute both in helping other activists and scholars to answer such questions for themselves, and for the sake of the movement.

The neo-Zapatistas are indeed, as they declared in their first public statement on January 1 1994, "the product of 500 years of resistance". However, this long history of resistance is not composed of a single thread, but rather of many, which allow the neo-Zapatistas to draw on a rich body of symbolisms and political cultures that stretch from local traditions of indigenous revolt to the national revolutionary agrarian figure of Emiliano Zapata, as well as Che Guevara, the international symbol of guerrilla warfare. It is the interweaving of all these elements that has given neo-Zapatismo its distinctive character and local, national, as well as global resonance, making the EZLN one of the most influential anti-capitalist movements in the world today.

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Recommended Web Pages and Blog spots :

<http://barrikadazapatista.wordpress.com/>

<http://chiapas.indymedia.org/>

<http://contralarepresion.wordpress.com/2010/06/>

<http://detodos-paratodos.blogspot.com/2009/03/concluye-el-encuentro-de-mujeres-mama.html>

<http://dignarabia.ezln.org.mx/>

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<http://rinconzapatistazac.blogspot.com/>

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<http://www.chiapasmediaproject.org/>

<http://www.coloquiointernacionalandresaubry.org/>

<http://www.contralaimpunidad.org/index.php>

<http://www.encuentroindigena.org/>

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<http://www.nodo50.org/pchiapas/chiapas/documentos/caracol/caracol.htm>

<http://www.radioinsurgente.org/>

<http://www.radiozapatista.org/IIEncuentro.htm>

<http://www.radiozapatista.org/index.html>

<http://www.serazln-altos.org/index.html>

Notes

1)

Xochitl Leyva Solano (1995a, b, and c, 1998, 2001, 2008) and Christopher Gunderson (2006, 2007, 2009) are scholar-activists who have been inspired by the neo-Zapatista experience and who hope that this presentation on the roots of that experience might be a small contribution to the debates and discussions that our South Asian colleagues and compañeros have been pursuing around emerging global movements. We dedicate it to the neo-Zapatista compañeros and compañeras who are the reason and inspiration for the international neo-Zapatista solidarity networks of which we are part. ㄥ

2)

CCRI 1994; Major Moisés 1997; Comandante Tacho 1997; SCI Marcos 1997; Leyva 1995a, 1998; Le Bot 1997. ㄥ

3)

See EZLN 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 2003a, 2003b, and journals such as *Rebeldía*, *Revista Chiapas*, and *Contrahistoria*. ㄥ

4)

Gunderson 2006, 2007, 2009, and 2013. ㄥ

5)

SCI Marcos 1997; Leyva 1998. ㄥ

6)

Hernández Navarro and Vera Herrera, 1996. ㄥ

7)

With the exception of their spokesman Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, the EZLN is composed mainly of indigenous people. ㄥ

8)

CCRI 1994, p 38. ㄥ

9)

Cited in Le Bot 1997a, p 137. ㄥ

10)

CCRI 1994, p 38. ㄥ

11)

Cited in Rovira 1996, p 62. ㄥ

12)

A finca in Chiapas is a large piece of land for agricultural use that has been expropriated by non-indigenous people for their private benefit. ㄥ

13)

Lenkersdorf 2001, p 27. ㄥ

14)

Ladino in Chiapas and Guatemala means a non-indigenous person. Sometimes this term refers to a white person, at other times to a mestizo or to a foreigner. Mestizo is a term traditionally used in Spain and Spanish-speaking Latin America to mean any person of mixed-race descent (broadly), a person of combined European and Amerindian descent.

ㄥ

15)

De Vos 1994. ۞

16)

Leyva and Ascencio 1996. ۞

17)

Leyva and Ascencio 1996, p 21. ۞

18)

Legorreta 2008, p 250. ۞

19)

Leyva and Ascencio 1996. ۞

20)

Community Document 2004. ۞

21)

Ed : As is well known, English and other European colonisers mistakenly used the term 'Indians' (and the equivalents in other European languages) to refer to the indigenous peoples they 'discovered' in what they then called 'the Americas'; thinking that they had arrived in the land called India. This term and its equivalents have subsequently come to become both widely internationalised – because of European colonialisms - and also relatively internalised, and even though it has come to be rejected by indigenous peoples in some contexts such as Turtle Island (North America, where the terms First Nations or Aboriginal Peoples are now used), it also continues to be used quite widely, especially in Abya Yala (Central and South America). In this book therefore, because it has been edited by Indians from India, and also published by OpenWord based in India, and in order to intervene in this history (rather than for nationalist reasons !) we have – with the agreement of our authors – used the term 'indigenous peoples' in place of 'Indians' wherever it appeared by itself, but have left the term as it is wherever it is qualified (and clarified) by another term, such as here. ۞

22)

Leyva 1995b, 2001. ۞

23)

Leyva 2008. ۞

24)

MacLeod 1973, pp 87-102. ۞

25)

De Vos 1995, p 248. ۞

26)

Cofradía is an institution of social and religious character and based in the principle of fraternity. It was introduced into the New World by the Spanish conquerors and resignified by the indigenous population, principally for the celebrations of the village Saints. ۞

27)

Bricker 1981, p 60. ۞

28)

Bricker 1981, pp 61-63. ۞

29)

Viqueira 1995, p 126. ↵

30)

De Vos 1995, pp 249-252. ↵

31)

In Latin America, the term *casta* was often used by the colonisers to describe the various racial categories and to divide the population. Ed : The term 'caste', to denote the structuring of society in South Asia (and now among the South Asian diaspora globally), comes from the same word but in Portuguese, who also established colonies in India. Given the degree to which the discrimination against Dalits and racial discrimination (and more generally a comparison of caste and race) is so strongly resisted by the middle and upper castes in India, it is interesting and revealing to see that the authors say that the term *casta* was used in Latin America to describe the various racial categories. ↵

32)

Bricker 1981; Pineda 1986; De Vos 1995; Rus 1998. ↵

33)

De Vos 1995, pp 250-252. ↵

34)

Rus 1998. ↵

35)

The historic Maya region covered the south of Mexico (the states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Yucatán and Chiapas), Guatemala, Belize, and western Honduras. ↵

36)

Rajchenberg and Héau-Lambert 2005, p 174. ↵

37)

Rajchenberg and Héau-Lambert 2005, p 179. ↵

38)

EZLN 1994b, p 5. ↵

39)

Leyva 1995c; De Vos 2002. ↵

40)

Iribarren 2003, pp 4-5; Fazio 1994, pp 55-82. ↵

41)

Leyva 1995c. ↵

42)

Fazio 1994, p 57. ↵

43)

Bringing together Cardinals, Bishops, leaders of the various orders, as well as observers from other churches and advisors trained in the social sciences, the Second Vatican Council met every autumn between 1962 and 1965 and revisited questions of church doctrine on a wide range of questions. The Council set the stage for the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops from which the current known as Liberation Theology emerged. Liberation Theology fused elements of a Marxist critique of capitalism with the Catholic Church's tradition of social action and became a major influence on the radical left in Latin America in the 1970s and after. ↵

44)

Iribaren 2003, p 5; see also Santiago 2009. ㄹ

45)

De Vos 2002. ㄹ

46)

Iribaren 2003. ㄹ

47)

Iribarren 2003. ㄹ

48)

Ruiz 1993, p 29; see also Ruiz and Santiago 1999. ㄹ

49)

Ruiz and Santiago 1999; Santiago 2009. ㄹ

50)

Morales 1992. ㄹ

51)

Leyva 1995c, p 394. ㄹ

52)

De Vos 2002, p 223. ㄹ

53)

Leyva 1995c. ㄹ

54)

Cited in Leyva 1995c. ㄹ

55)

Morales 1992. ㄹ

56)

Morales 1992, García de León 2002. ㄹ

57)

A major student movement, critical of the rule of the PRI, emerged in Mexico in 1968. A general student strike began in August and on October 2 1968 hundreds of student protesters were massacred in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City. Thousands of students were arrested and imprisoned; others were disappeared. ㄹ

58)

Mao 1967. ㄹ

59)

Bennett and Bracho 1993, pp 91-92. ㄹ

60)

Barbosa 1984, p 128. ㄹ

61)

García de León 2002, pp 166-170. ↵

62)

Barbosa 1984; Bennett and Bracho 1993. ↵

63)

Marcos 1997, p 135. ↵

64)

Cedillo 2008. ↵

65)

Cedillo 2008, pp 68-69. ↵

66)

Cedillo 2008, p 185. ↵

67)

Vargas 2008, p 129. ↵

68)

Spenser 2008, p 109. ↵

69)

Flores 2008. ↵

70)

Cedillo 2008. ↵

71)

Nepantla 2009. ↵

72)

In Le Bot 1997 p 164. ↵

73)

Moisés 1997, pp 171-172. ↵

74)

Leyva 2008. ↵

75)

Galland 2007, pp 97, 102. ↵

76)

We have three reasons for our argument that the historical roots of neo-Zapatismo are not known in all their depth. The first is that in the wake of the 1994 uprising, the air of mystery around the EZLN's origins proved to be a valuable political asset for the movement. It allowed the neo-Zapatistas to exercise greater power over their public image, encouraged continual interest in the group, and enabled a broad range of sympathisers to project their own vision onto the rebels. Second, since this is an unfinished war, information on neo-Zapatista origins can easily turn into booty for the enemy. Third, although there was a somehow erratic but nevertheless important local production before 1994 (academic articles, documents of campesino organizations, newspapers, governmental information, etc), a lot of this information has not been included in the work on neo-Zapatismo in a conscientious fashion. On the contrary, many have opted to focus on what took place (the events) after 1994. References to this pioneering material can be consulted in Leyva and Ascencio

1996. A first systematic listing of a wide-ranging bibliography on neo-Zapatismo produced after 1994 can be found in Gordillo 2006. ↵