

PREFACE

The last part of the research that gave birth to this book took place in the midst of a political event that shook the Mexican state and brought into question a national project in which indigenous peoples were still second-class citizens.

On January 1 a group of Mayan indigenous people in the state of Chiapas, in the southeast of the Mexican republic, took up arms against *neoliberalismo*,¹ the neoliberal policies promoted by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994). On the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the United States, and Canada² went into effect, Chiapas's indigenous peoples showed the world the failure of the new economic model. Their reality clashed with the official version promoted by *Salinismo*,³ in the sense that poverty and marginalization were over and Mexico had become a “first world country.”

Organized under the name National Liberation Zapatista Army (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN), Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol, and Tojolabal indigenous peoples declared war on “the illegal dictatorship” of Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his official party (PRI). In their political discourse, Zapatistas talked about the immediate causes of their uprising, referring to the effect of neoliberal policies on the lives of thousands of indigenous peasants in Mexico and at the same time linking their struggle to the five hundred years of colonial and postcolonial indigenous resistance against racism and economic oppression.

The movement was immediately dismissed by intellectuals linked to the

state, and two weeks after the beginning of the movement Arturo Warman said about the EZLN: "It is not a spontaneous movement, or a popular outbreak, but rather a carefully planned action after years of preparation. . . . Not an indigenous or peasant ancestral riot or uprising, but undoubtedly the product of a political-military strategy of the second half of our century, although it may now be outdated."⁴

This denial of the indigenous origin of the rebellion and the constant search for "authenticity" are products of an ahistoric vision of Chiapas's indigenous peoples, which does not acknowledge their organizational experiences and the hybrid character of their cultural identities. That an indigenous movement should take up arms to reject the terms of NAFTA showed the world a different face of the indigenous population of Chiapas, a face that has little to do with the folkloric and traditional image promoted in the official discourse.

Zapatista indigenous demands are closer to the global village than to the corporate community described by culturalist ethnographies. During the last twenty years, Chiapas's indigenous people have been involved in organizational processes of a political and productive character that have led to the establishment of communication and solidarity links with indigenous and peasant peoples from other regions of Mexico and beyond its national borders. These experiences have had a great influence on their cultural practices and discourses and on the specific ways in which they imagine themselves as indigenous and as Mexicans.

When the Zapatista uprising began, I was trying to understand the emergence of these new collective identities and the reinvention of cultural traditions in response to state policies and global processes among the Mam, an indigenous Maya group in Chiapas's Sierra Madre. Mam peasants, with whom I lived from 1988 to 1990 and from 1993 to mid-1995, have not directly participated in the EZLN armed movement, but they follow the struggle with great interest, and many Mam have supported its demands through so-called peaceful civil resistance. The history of indigenist policies in Chiapas helps us to understand the moment in which the Zapatista uprising broke out and the form it took.

The analysis of the relationship between Mam peasants and the Mexican state from 1934 onward shows at close range how indigenous peoples have rejected, accepted, or negotiated the official discourse on "being Mexican" and their participation in the construction of a national project. There is no single answer from indigenous peasants to state policies and Zapatista proposals. The regional history as well as religious and organizational differences have influenced the different ways of being *Indian* in

Chiapas. The voices and experiences of Mam peasants help us to problematize the view of the state as an exclusive space of domination and control and the perspectives that represent indigenous cultures as homogeneous and harmonious.

This book confronts the dichotomic visions both of those who see the Zapatistas as “manipulated” by left-wing radical groups and of those who represent *PRLista* peasants as state puppets. These Manichaeian visions do not allow us to understand the complexity of Chiapas’s contemporary political panorama. The search for a peaceful outcome to the conflict has to start from an acknowledgment of Chiapas’s indigenous peoples as the social actors in their own history. Turning back to the past and accepting the mistakes of indigenist and developmental policies can open the way for a new relationship between the state and indigenous peoples under new terms.

When this book was being finished in 1999, five years after the beginning of the Zapatista conflict, the Mam zone as well as the rest of the state of Chiapas were completely militarized. More than sixty thousand Federal Army troops were sent there and placed in thirty large military centers. The annual military expenditure in Chiapas was reckoned at \$200 million (García de León 1996:51). At the same time, both national and international organizations denounced the approximately thirty-one paramilitary groups that operated freely in various regions in the state.

Militarization and paramilitarization have upset everyday life in communities and have exacerbated the differences that already exist among social groups. The social and cultural impact that such processes may have on Chiapas’s indigenous peoples in the long term is still unpredictable. Academic research has much to contribute to the construction of peace by analyzing past mistakes and placing at the center the voices that have been systematically silenced, such as those of Mesoamerican indigenous peoples. This book is an effort to describe the complexity and richness of their experiences.

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