

Paradigm Piracy: The EZLN and the Quest to Categorize



By
L. Benjamin Cushing

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Professor Rector
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Readers
Professor John L. Rector, PHD
Professor Maureen Dolan, PHD

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In the context of neo-liberal proliferation and increasingly anti-indigenous Mexican legislation, a destitute community of peasants took up arms in the southeastern state of Chiapas. Enflamed by 500 years of abuse and catalyzed by the destruction of the Mexican ejido system, they revolted.

“*Basta*,” they cried in ferocious unison on January 1, 1994, as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), or Zapatista Army of National Liberation, rose up in Chiapas, Mexico. But what exactly did they mean? Besides the direct Spanish translation, “Enough,” what were these strange new revolutionaries demanding? At first glance they seemed to resemble other Latin American guerilla movements in the 20th century, but the keen-eyed noticed that perhaps the Zapatistas were something different. As the first days of the insurrection passed, observers began to scramble to define these Chiapan revolutionaries. Many, cognoscente of the tradition of Marxist influence within Latin American radical movements, found the ‘socialist’ name tag convenient. Others, most notably northern intellectuals eager to co-opt the rebellion into their own intellectual brainchild, labeled the Zapatistas ‘postmodern.’ Still others insisted that this was a movement for indigenous rights and land reform. Indeed, the interpretations were many, and they only grew with the intensity and duration of the insurrection. It turns out, the Zapatistas have proved quite difficult to label. In fact, they have denied outside intellectuals the pleasure of placing them into an epistemological box. The Zapatistas, despite the best effort of the academic community, refuse to be categorized.

Perhaps the intrigue of the Zapatistas is that they propose the most passionate and romantic ideals, and yet they are full of apparent contradiction. They claim to be a revolutionary army with no aspiration of attaining power. Behind facemasks and rifles,

they promoted the ideals of non-violence. The Zapatistas demand indigenous rights and local autonomy from the platform of global change.¹ They seem to promote diverging and even mutually exclusive, socio-political theories. To the outside observer, the EZLN epitomizes contradiction, yet under more extensive analysis they reveal unprecedented consistency in their democratic and social ideals.

In the effort to sift through these complexities, academics have utilized five general categories in their attempt to classify and conceptualize the EZLN. These major competing paradigms are: radical democracy, indigenous rights, socialist, anti-globalization, and postmodern. The intellectual quest to categorize has proposed each of these paradigms, as well as many hybrids, creating a sea of diverse intellectual understanding (and misunderstanding). This analysis, however, will focus on the five paradigms listed above.

First, many scholars have taken note of the Zapatistas' unique political structure and utilized it to categorize this complex revolt as a struggle for radical democracy. As Gustavo Esteva argues, the EZLN has constructed an innovative and truly revolutionary democratic society. John Ross, however, one of the leading experts on the Zapatista rebellion, disagrees. Although he recognizes their radically democratic nature, he classifies the movement as a struggle for indigenous rights, in the tradition of centuries of Indian resistance, rather than a movement to construct a radically new political model.

The third paradigm, the socialist analysis, seems to fit nicely into the revolutionary history of Latin America. Marxist rebellion has dominated twentieth century Latin American political revolutions. Why, then, should the Zapatistas be any different? They clearly demand economic restructuring, capitalist resistance, and a more

equal distribution of wealth. Daniel Nugent, a prominent socialist scholar, claims that the Zapatistas *are* essentially Marxists. Other scholars from the radical, anti-capitalist community have, nevertheless, diverged from the socialist label. They classify the insurrection as a rejection of neoliberal trade policies imposed by the wealthy nations of the world and exemplified by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In fact, this interpretation has become so popular within the leftist community that the Zapatistas have become a symbol of global resistance to free trade capitalism.

The final, and perhaps most popular interpretation among northern intellectuals, is the postmodern view. These scholars justify their claim by pointing out the unique nature of the Zapatista movement and its divergence from other movements in the ‘modern’ past. This approach, as we will see, is both unconvincing and dangerous. It conceals the suffering of the indigenous populations of Mexico while undermining this rebellion’s connection to the past.

Although each of these interpretations provide some insight into the complex Zapatista movement, each of them falls short of providing a comprehensive understanding. Intellectuals, in their attempts to make sense of complexity, often rationalize the world into conceptual categories, sub-categories, and well-defined boxes. These categories are often truly helpful and legitimate in quest to understand the world, but they can conceal important complexities. In addition, these preconceived categories can prejudice the mind and inhibit the ability to recognize something truly unique and innovative. Scholars make the mistake of prematurely placing a movement into an inappropriate category. Like a child in a play room, they attempt to fit a square block into a round hole when it simply does not fit. Perhaps, instead of cramming the EZLN

into a preconceived slot, they should try to understand it as a movement of its own. Perhaps a new category must be constructed, although it is not the purpose of this analysis to do so. Rather, I contend that none of the above paradigms provide an adequate understanding of the Zapatista uprising. The EZLN must be understood in its own right, within the context of past revolutions but not bound to them. Furthermore, we must recognize it for its innovations but not label it with the inaccurate, and less than illuminating, 'postmodern' paradigm.

A Brief History of the EZLN

Chiapas, the wealthiest state in Mexico in natural resources but with the poorest indigenous population, became a hotbed of peasant organizing throughout the second half of the twentieth century. A large native population continually exploited by local landowners and national and international businesses for cheap, expendable labor created an environment in which peasant organizing thrived. Groups utilizing every strategy from reformist organizing to Maoist revolution developed in resistance to exploitation. With few successes, and an increasingly destitute Indian population, these groups began to lose their popular support. Chiapas was desperate for social change; it ranked first among Mexican states in illiteracy rate, rate of population older than 15 who have not finished primary school, percent of people living without electricity and in overcrowded housing, and in lowest wages, with more than 80 percent making less than twice minimum wage.² As health problems often accompany economic hardship, Chiapas

suffered 150,000 indigenous deaths as a result of “poverty, malnutrition and curable diseases during the decade before the Zapatista Uprising.”³

In 1982, Mexican oil prices plummeted, limiting Mexico’s ability to repay national debts and causing a massive instability in global banking.⁴ Consequently, the international financial community forced Mexico to radically restructure its finances, slashing funding to rural assistance programs. Furthermore, Mexican president Salinas de Gortari insisted on reforming Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, stripping the communal ownership of indigenous land that had been established after the 1910 revolution.⁵ As Subcomandante Marcos would later comment, “That was an important catalyst. The reforms negated the legal possibility to obtain land, and it was land that was the basis of peasants’ self-defense.”⁶

The revolt of the EZLN, however, was far from a spontaneous event. More than a decade of planning preceded the insurrection. On November 16, 1983, a group of six Mexican idealists from the north (one of whom being Marcos) met a small group of Indians and radical activists in Chiapas to discuss political and military options for improving their desperate situation.⁷ The group, which would become the EZLN, quickly went underground and began to train in the Lacandón Jungle.⁸ They slowly acquired weapons, grew in number, and educated themselves on revolutionary tactics and the laws of warfare. Early in its organizational history, the EZLN was a socialist organization in ideology and strategy, like many revolutionary groups which had come before it.⁹ This, however, changed as the outside organizers and local indigenous groups began to melt into one another. The leaders began to stray from their Marxist fundamentals while the local population began to recognize larger socio-political issues

and understand their conditions within this expanded scope.¹⁰ It was at this point, when outside leaders and local people combined their experiences and attitudes, that the Zapatistas began to multiply rapidly.

As their organization solidified, conditions within Chiapas only worsened. Not only were Mexico's national policies limiting the ability of indigenous people to defend themselves by removing local control of government and more particularly land, international policies were doing the same. On December 8, 1993, United States President Bill Clinton signed NAFTA. Critics shunned the agreement, arguing that it would encourage United States business to relocate to Mexico in order to exploit cheap, non-union labor and weak environmental regulations.¹¹ Mexican farmers especially feared the impacts of NAFTA, as it would flood the Mexican market with cheap United States crops, especially corn.¹² As neoliberal economic policies typically harm poorest regions most, Chiapas would feel the negative impact of trade liberalization to the fullest.

Not only was the situation for indigenous people in Chiapas going from bad to worse, but faith in the established peasant organizations and their insistence to work within the system was dwindling. To the Zapatistas, it seemed clear that the only way to create the change they desired was through rebellion. As numbers continued to grow and local peasant organizations joined the ranks of the EZLN, it seems clear that the Mexican government began to take notice. Government and military officials became aware of the Zapatista rebels as early as December of 1992, when authorities noticed the unloading of arms "somewhere in the Lacandón Jungle."¹³ Shortly afterward, they were able to infiltrate a spy into the Zapatista ranks. By May of 1993, the Mexican Army had moved 4,000 troops to the region surrounding the Lacandón Jungle, and conflict seemed to be on

the horizon. Skirmishes, with only few casualties, did arise, but the large-scale war expected by General Godínez, of the Mexican military, failed to materialize at that point.¹⁴

The Zapatistas had escalated to red alert in expectance of an invasion, but on May 26th the military was suddenly, and surprisingly, withdrawn from the region.¹⁵ The EZLN was perplexed. It now seems quite clear that Mexican officials withdrew their troops out of fear that war in Chiapas would cause uncertainty within the international business community which could postpone or even prevent the passage of NAFTA. *Proceso*, a popular Mexican magazine, reported on January 10, 1994, “To have entered the jungle in full force would have had international repercussions. Salinas and his advisers decided to postpone the confrontations until after NAFTA was functioning and the August elections had taken place.”¹⁶ This delay by the Mexican government allowed the EZLN’s rebellion to be staged upon the terms of the indigenous people, not the government. On January 1, 1994, the day that NAFTA went into effect, Chiapas exploded into a surprise rebellion.

That day, the Zapatistas sacked the political and economic center of the Chiapan highlands, San Cristóbal de las Casas, as well as three municipal seats in Ocosingo, Las Margaritas, and Altamirano.¹⁷ According to their 1993 letter to the People of Mexico, their demands were simply “work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, and peace.”¹⁸ The Mexican military responded quickly and forcefully, driving the Zapatistas into the jungle where they would continue to run an information campaign, building international support and mounting pressure on the government to meet their demands.

A series of negotiations took place between the EZLN and government officials. In 1995, in negotiations known as the San Andres accords, the government conceded to substantial “indigenous autonomy and self determination.” Their promises, however, were empty, for they never materialized.¹⁹ A 1996 congressional bill gave hope to the EZLN that the conflict might be resolved. The bill would allow indigenous self-governance, collective land ownership and control of their natural resources.²⁰ Ernesto Zedillo, Mexico’s new president, shelved the bill and consequently heightened the tension in Chiapas. Hopes were raised once again when, in 2000, newly elected president Vicente Fox, who had campaigned on the slogan that he would solve the problems in Chiapas “in fifteen minutes,” presented a bill to congress that he thought would meet the demands of the EZLN.

In late February 2001, the EZLN sent a historic delegation to Mexico City to address congress. In their address, Commander Esther, a Zapatista woman, declared, “Our warriors have done their job. The person speaking to you is not the military leader of a rebel army, but the political leadership of a legitimate movement.”²¹ Congress, however, was not impressed, for they stripped the bill of most of its progressive language, an act that greatly disappointed and outraged the indigenous community. The EZLN considered the revised bill a “call to war.”²² They returned to the Lacandón Jungle where they continue to struggle for the improvement of the Indigenous situation. One major task that has occupied much of their energy, and which continues to do so, is the continuous attempt to construct their image and communicate their agenda to a curious and confused global community.

The Zapatistas as Proponents of Radical Democracy

One of the more popular paradigms utilized by the global community claims that the Zapatistas are constructing a new model for political society. The EZLN struggles for the radical democratization of their socio-political experience. Perhaps beyond any other goal, they attempt to create a truly democratic society. Here, it is important to distinguish between the Zapatistas' notion of democracy and the western tradition of representative democracy. The Zapatistas see the modern 'democratic' state as the failure of the western democratic tradition. It caters to the powerful elite and neglects the masses at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This democratic structure has failed the vast majority of the human population.

The EZLN proposes a new form of democratic structure based on the cultivation of 'people's power' and the embrace of 'personal and collective difference.'²³

As Indian peoples that we mostly are, we claim to govern ourselves, with autonomy, because we don't want any longer to be subjects of the will of any national or foreign power...Justice should be administered by our own communities, according to their customs and traditions, without the intervention of corrupt and illegitimate governments.²⁴

'Commanding obeying,' combined with a faith in 'civil society,' provides the foundation of the Zapatistas' democratic model. 'Command obeying', an apparent oxymoron, is a political practice borrowed from indigenous tradition in which leaders are constantly held accountable to those whom they represent through an ever-present threat of public removal.²⁵ Continually, in a variety of communications, they promote, "...the right to democracy, so that everyone's opinions should have value, so that the popular will be respected and enforced, by electing or revoking, as needed, a form of government

and governmental public servants. We demand that those who govern command obeying.”²⁶ Therefore, at any time a leader can be revoked by the community if his or her actions are unacceptable. The Zapatista proposal for radical democracy derives its power directly from what they continually refer to as civil society.

Civil society is the people themselves, self-empowered and unattached to any political party or theoretical meta-narrative and in opposition to state power. The Zapatistas, as an exercise in civil society, have created a democratic model with a radical decentralization of power. Through command obeying and a less-hierarchical society, which has organized more than a thousand communities into thirty two regional municipalities, each locally controlled, they have largely accomplished their democratic goals.²⁷ Perhaps this is best represented by the wide acceptance of divergent perspectives and thought within the Zapatistas’ democratic system.

The very concept of radical democracy is based upon the premise that diverse personal and collective opinions must be respected and represented. ‘Basta,’ the rallying cry of the insurrection displays the ability of the EZLN to embody a multiplicity of social discontent. By saying ‘enough,’ they are rejecting exploitation in all of its forms, not just the abuse of workers or landless peasants or indigenous people or any other collective subdivision of the Zapatistas. Rather, the Zapatista political model is completely inclusive. Within this system they have been able to resist power without the goal of taking power. In effect, radical democracy provides legitimacy to the insurrection and its larger social goals.

Understanding the radical democracy paradigm entails separating it from the concept of radical democracy itself. Therefore, those who subscribe to this paradigm

contend that the Zapatista rebellion is essentially a rebellion to create radical democracy. This is true. However, this paradigm falls short of providing a comprehensive description of the EZLN. The movement must be understood for its demand of radical democracy along with many other issues. It is also a struggle for economic equity, anti-neoliberalism, and racial equality. It is important to remember here that this critique is not aimed at the ability of radical democracy itself to address these varying issues. Rather, it is proclaiming that scholars who have attempted to encapsulate the EZLN within the category of “radical democrats” have oversimplified the movement. Unless economic, ethnic and traditional factors are address within a paradigm, it is doomed to fail, destroyed by the attempt to oversimplify.

The Zapatistas as Indigenous Rebels

The indigenous rebel paradigm has found many supporters as academics have struggled to understand the Zapatistas. Despite its shortcomings, this approach helps to illuminate a great deal of the EZLN’s nature. It claims that the Zapatistas represent an Indian rebellion, sharing a legacy of many former indigenous revolutionaries and their goal of reconstructing a traditional Indian society.

Part of this assertion is very valid. The EZLN’s revolutionary rhetoric clearly attempts to connect the current insurrection with historic struggle. The very word choice for their name, the Zapatistas, is burrowed from the name of the famous revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, who fought for land reform and indigenous rights in the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Attempting to show their connection to age old oppression, the Zapatistas

have adopted the rallying cry, “Zapata vive, la lucha sigue” (“Zapata lives, the struggle continues”). This is a powerful organizing slogan that solidifies peasant discontent, while generating legitimacy through connection to the historic hero. The Zapatistas are not the first Latin American radical movement to implement this strategy. The Sandinistas of Nicaragua borrowed the name of a historic national hero, Sandino, for their name.

In this same vain, the Zapatistas opted to name their massive meeting hall, constructed to hold civil society gatherings, after the famous site of the 1914 Sovereign Revolutionary Convention. The latter was where revolutionary leaders met for the first time to discuss the creation of a free Mexican state. The Zapatistas meeting hall, like the city that hosted this historic convention, is called Aguascalientes, a name that resonates in Mexican historical memory.²⁸

Image construction is important to any social movement, and the EZLN has attempted to create their image with a strong connection to Mexico’s historical memory and nationalist sentiment. This is a strategic construction. As John Ross puts it, “History is a formidable weapon.”²⁹ In fact, historical legitimacy has replaced the need for great military might. The EZLN, with its insignificant weaponry and human numbers, could be easily decimated by the power of the Mexican military. They have created widespread empathy by using history to construct an ideological high ground to compensate for their lack of military strength.³⁰ Gramsci has described this process as a “war of position.”³¹ As a result, the Mexican forces, under the watchful eye of the Mexican people and the people of the world, opted against waging full-scale warfare to put down the EZLN’s rebellion.

Not only does understanding the Zapatistas as an indigenous rebellion help the EZLN strategically, it also helps the outside observer to place many of the Zapatistas' demands into a historical context. Most notably in this respect, they are revolting against the Salinas administration's revocation of land reform. Land reform had been established following the 1910 revolution in an effort to resurrect traditional communal land ownership. In this sense the rebellion of the EZLN is a reaction to Salinas's anti-indigenous legislation that destroyed native economic and social structure as well as the historically symbolic achievements of the indigenous hero Emiliano Zapata, who rebelled in response to similar nineteenth century land grabs.

The elements of traditional indigenous rebellion are important in understanding the Zapatista insurrection and its social goals. Nevertheless, the Zapatistas are far from a traditional revolutionary force. They are not seeking a return to the past. Clearly, they are proposing new and innovative socio-economic models, spawned from the past but certainly not attempting to return to it. Their revolutionary tactics, including the divorce of revolutionary protocol from the control of the state, as well as their demands for radical democracy, are far from traditional. In an apparent paradox, the Zapatistas are visionaries of a truly revolutionary future while simultaneously embracing traditional ideals. These ideals, however, are a hybrid of the traditional and the contemporary. The 'indigenous struggle' paradigm fails to see the Zapatistas as the innovators that they are. Instead, like other attempts to classify this unique movement, it fails in its oversimplification.

The socialist approach, which was perhaps the first adopted by many analysts, focuses largely on the economic factors of Chiapas and, of course, the class struggle. In Chiapas, local hardship certainly provided a fertile environment for Marxist revolt. As the nation's economy began to shift from a national socialist model to a capitalist, many rural populations were largely left out of Mexican growth.³² The consequential growth in economic disparity between the urban population and the rural peasantry increased class tension. Clearly, class struggle has played an important role in the Zapatista revolt, but is it, in fact, a Marxist revolutionary attempt?

At the dawn of the EZLN's organization, the goals were certainly Marxist. Leaders saw themselves as members of a 'revolutionary vanguard' in the classic Communist sense.³³ They trained in the tactical styles of Che Guevara, the famous Latin American Marxist revolutionary, and they studied the theories of Lenin and Mao.³⁴ As discussed previously, however, this orientation did not last as the Zapatistas grew in numbers, diversified, and developed new theoretical constructions, including radical democracy. In the early days of the revolt this transformation was little known, and consequently many recognized the demands of the Zapatistas as socialist.

A United States military analysis published in October of 1994 argues that one of the EZLN's three goals is to "establish socialism," along with improving living conditions and creating avenues by which peasants could enter mainstream Mexican society.³⁵ When seen in the light of Zapatista demands for communal land ownership and economic autonomy, this assessment makes some sense. Furthermore, as Dario Fernandez-Morera argues in a very negative portrait of the Zapatistas, "among [the goals

of the EZLN is] the creation of a socialist country.”³⁶ These analyses, however, are based on inadequate information and preconceived bias. In fact the Zapatistas have proven to be quite anti-socialist despite their goals of socio-economic equality.

The Zapatistas were never Marxists, although some of their leaders may have been before embarking on their ongoing idealistic evolution; indeed it is a revolutionary evolution. The collaboration between local and outside leaders began to promote the traditional indigenous social model that accepts multiplicity and diversity. Marxism became one of many theoretical frameworks embraced by the EZLN. Leaders discovered that radical democracy prevents the dominance of one meta-narrative, like Marxism, especially when diverse views are freely expressed. Soon the Zapatista model radically diverged from that of the Leninist Proletariat Dictatorship.

Furthermore, the Zapatistas, unlike Communist revolutionaries, have no party. Their political organization is precisely the voice of the communities they represent, and their army, too, is composed of the very same elements: civil society. Through uniquely democratic structures, most notably the concept of command-obeying, the Zapatistas have redefined the revolutionary project that had previously been dominated by socialists. As Luis Lorenzano put it, “the practice of ‘commanding obeying’ clearly demonstrates the central difference between the Zapatistas and all former Latin American Revolutionary experiences: the Zapatistas are not a ‘guerrilla force’ nor an ‘armed party’ with a particular social base, but rather they are the base itself...”³⁷ Unlike the Leninist ‘party’ approach, the EZLN is a mobilization of a community as a whole. This justifies the common label of the EZLN as a ‘community in arms.’³⁸

Perhaps the most compelling refutation of the socialist paradigm rests in the fact that the EZLN rejects the goal of attaining state power. As they wrote, “It is necessary that all social relations in Mexico today undergo a profound, radical change. There must be a revolution, a new revolution. This revolution will only be possible from outside the system of the party state.”³⁹ In fact, the Zapatistas, instead of trying to conquer power, have simply tried to abolish, or at least redirect, power itself. “We want to change the world,” as Marcos put it, “but not by taking power, not to conquer the world, but to make it anew.”⁴⁰ The divorce of revolutionary tactics from the attainment of state control is truly revolutionary and completely contrary to Leninist/Maoist approaches. Some Marxist scholars have debated this point, for good reason. They cite the fact that the Zapatistas’ original declaration of war orders EZLN troops to “Advance to the capital of the country, defeat the Mexican Federal Army...and permit the liberated peoples to elect, freely and democratically, their own administrative authorities.”⁴¹ Although this is certainly true, and gives us insight into the many contradictions within the EZLN, the evidence to the contrary abounds. Marcos affirmed the Zapatista position in late 1994:

It is true that we are an armed movement which does not want to take power, as in the old revolutionary schemes, and that we call upon civil society to join us in peaceful action, to prevent war. That is the paradox of the EZLN. But we are confronted with a contradiction. I am referring to the EZLN of eleven years ago, which was established to take power through armed force. We were a military organization in the classic sense of the word. For that reason, the primary contribution of what is known today as neo-Zapatismo came from the clash between that rigid conception and the reality of the indigenous communities. The insertion of a democratic structure into an authoritarian one; decision-making in indigenous communities versus decision-making in a completely vertical political military organization.⁴²

At one point Marcos even went further in his refutation of socialist revolution. In a letter to leaders of the Marxist revolutionary guerrilla forces, called the Peoples

Revolutionary Army, he denounced their tactics: “You fight for power, we fight for democracy, freedom and justice. We do not need you help, or want it.”⁴³

The EZLN as Anti-Neoliberal Revolutionists

Although they are not socialists, the Zapatistas are certainly anti-capitalists. As previously discussed, the Zapatista rebellion was in many ways a response to the economic policies of Salinas. The nation had made a massive economic transition from the isolationism of the 1910 revolution to the free-trade model endorsed by the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other neoliberal organizations. As a result, jobs were created in urban areas and the already massive class disparity in Mexico only grew.⁴⁴ The Salinas administration threw additional gasoline upon the flames of peasant discontent when it destroyed land reform. NAFTA came as a final blow, as it proposed a complete destruction of indigenous agricultural markets, land distribution and social structure. When the Zapatistas rebelled on the day of NAFTA’s implementation they sent a message to the world that global capitalism was hurting the world’s poor. Furthermore, they rejected capital’s domination of the people around the globe. “...we can build [the world] as we want it and not as Power wants it to be. We have made the Power of Money tremble ... and dignity is beginning to unite. The Power of Money is afraid because the uniting of dignities signifies its downfall.”⁴⁵ But the Zapatistas critique of neoliberalism was more than just a reaction to the loss of land reform; it was also a refusal to be assimilated into the capitalist world economy.

The Zapatistas understood the coming impacts of neoliberalism. Many of their leaders, being educated in socialist theory, understood the threat of capitalist expansion and quickly educated the local population. They foresaw not only the loss of their land, but the loss of what little local autonomy they still retained. They feared losing the ability to produce for themselves and the control of their natural resources. Although opening Chiapas to foreign markets would surely bring jobs to the region, it would accelerate the transformation of labor to low-paying, brutal 'sweatshop' manufacturing, industrial agriculture and natural resource extraction. Furthermore, these invading industries would fail to employ the entire population, leaving many Chiapans both jobless and landless. According to World Bank demands, neoliberal restructuring would eliminate many social services that might have protected some of the peasant population. The Zapatistas therefore joined in the anti-capitalist struggle. They did not, however, take the Marxist approach of controlling the means of production. Rather, they rejected the industrial capitalist model altogether. In this sense, the rebellion was not a workers revolt, but a revolt of those who refuse to be workers within the modern neoliberal world market.

A 1996 international meeting of anti-globalization activists hosted by the EZLN in Chiapas sums up the sentiments of the Zapatistas in its title: "For Humanity Against Neoliberalism."⁴⁶ Gustavo Esteva has even called the Zapatistas the "antithesis of neoliberalism."⁴⁷ In fact, the rebellion has become a symbol for anti-globalization activists across the globe, romanticized and idealized by the movement's rhetoric. The Zapatistas strategically responded to neoliberal expansion by demanding what they call

the “globalization of freedom.”⁴⁸ Their resistance, of course, is against all domination, and in order to achieve freedom they have chosen to resist power in all of its forms.

Recognizing the increasingly powerful marriage of business and the state, the Zapatistas have chosen to attack both. As national borders dissolve into transnational marketplaces and the international business community increasingly controls national governments, localized resistance to state domination falls short of addressing the global network of power. The “Power of Money” to which the Zapatistas refer is the hegemonic force that has come from the marriage of capital interest and many state governments. In this sense, their rebellion against this conglomerate of power (international capital and national government) is, in neo-Gramscian terms, a truly counter-hegemonic revolt.⁴⁹ Neoliberalism has broadened the scope of contemporary rebellion by combining international state and economic powers. Since the state relies on capital, and visa versa, a revolt against power must be directed at both. Consequently, alongside their resistance to the domination of the Mexican government, the EZLN has rejected what they see as American Colonialism. One prominent EZLN rallying cry makes this clear: “No queremos, y no nos da la gana, Ser una colonia, norteamericana (we don’t want, and it doesn’t do us any good, to be a North American colony.)”⁵⁰

Indeed, it is impossible to understand the insurrection of the EZLN without addressing its rejection of neo-liberal economics and the globalization of capitalism. It is equally impossible to address the anti-globalization movement without mentioning the monumental importance of the EZLN. But the Zapatistas comprise a complex social movement and revolutionary force that are not easily labeled. Although they are certainly anti-neoliberal, the title is quite inadequate in characterizing the movement as a

whole. It makes no mention of their great diversity in social goals, and it fails to address the long history of peasant organizing from which it grew. Like those paradigms already discussed, this one, too, falls short of providing a fitting box in which to place this awkward movement. There is one paradigm, however, that boasts the ability to categorize the Zapatistas: postmodernism.

Raging Against the Politics of Modernity:

The Postmodern Perspective

Postmodernists have argued in favor of what has become the most popular, and certainly most controversial, paradigm in relation to the EZLN. The postmodern paradigm was borne of the post-Cold War era. As the Soviet bloc crumbled, so too did the hopes of many leftist intellectuals. The final blow to Bolshevik Communism had crushed many intellectuals' hopes of creating a classless society. Despair turned to disillusionment and finally to cynicism. Accordingly, if the Marxist meta-narrative had failed, they concluded, all other meta-narratives must ultimately fail as well. A sort of theoretical relativism began to sweep over the disillusioned left, claiming that all grand theories were merely the products of cultural bias and therefore void of validity. From this relativism, the postmodern perspective was born. The danger of this theory, (which, ironically, has constructed its own meta-narrative) is that it denies the legitimacy of all liberation-based struggles. Class struggle, racial equality, indigenous rights and anti-Capitalist movements, according to the postmodern critique, are no more than culturally biased and theoretically impotent relatives. It was within this theoretical context that the

Zapatistas rebelled, rejecting the old models of ‘modern’ rebellion as well as postmodern relativism.

Many postmodern scholars have pointed to the Zapatistas unprecedented media campaign as proof of their postmodernity. It is true that ‘techno-rebellion’ has played a major role in the EZLN’s success and that it is an interesting break from past revolutionary practices. For example, solidarity activists, supporting the struggle of the EZLN and opposing the economic and military dominance of Mexican and American forces, used new software know as ‘floodnet’ to tie up the internet communication of the Mexican government, the Frankfurt Stock Exchange, and the Pentagon. On September 28, 1998, 20,000 international activists loaded these web pages and shut them down for up to three hours. In a global reaction revealing the success of the tactic, international media covered the event.⁵¹

Instead of the common claim that this proves their postmodernity, Stefan Wray argues that what he calls ‘electronic civil disobedience’ is simply the logical progression of a century of activist tradition.⁵² In the past, activists have staged sit-ins and various other forms of civil disobedience in an effort to block economic and political transaction. But in current times, blocking doorways or interstates has lost its effectiveness. “The streets” as many economists and activists have recognized, “have become the location of dead capital.”⁵³ In the contemporary economic system, big business conducts major transactions in cyberspace rather than physical arenas. Consequently, civil disobedience has changed with the times as it attempts to confront power where it is vulnerable.⁵⁴ In this light, the Zapatistas’ techno-rebellion loses its postmodern mysticism, but it gains the historical context of applying modern technology to traditional civil resistance.

Not only does the postmodern emphasis on technology neglect the history of civil disobedience, it denies the movement's connection to the past. As we have seen, the rebellion in Chiapas was the product of a decade of organizing, and as the Zapatistas themselves put it in the first phrase of their declaration of war, "we are the product of five hundred years of struggle..."⁵⁵ This hardly seems like the language of a postmodern movement. In fact, the rhetoric of Zapatismo is quite modern. Their call for "work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, and peace" is deeply rooted in the struggles of modernity. Certainly, it is true that the EZLN has rejected the modern dichotomy of Socialist-Capitalist war, but their rebellion is rooted in class struggle, ethnic autonomy, and the fight for true democracy and freedom. All of these objectives are quite modern. Furthermore, postmodern theoretical relativism has debunked the notions of freedom, democracy, and class struggle as culturally biased. How, then, could postmodernists claim the EZLN as their own? The truth is that the Zapatistas have rejected the postmodern disillusionment and risen up *in spite of it*. Clearly, Adam David Morton's assertion that the EZLN is a rebellion to "move beyond the politics of modernity" is exaggerated and misleading.⁵⁶ In fact, the postmodern analysis distorts the image of the Zapatistas. It denies the movement's root in traditional struggle while artificially forcing it into the preconceived theoretical model of postmodern scholars.⁵⁷

The contemporary failure to understand the complexities of the Zapatistas stems from the scholarly community's insistence on classifying the movement into preconceived paradigms. This study has shown, however, that this movement resists classification as much as it resists domination. By attempting to label the Zapatistas while ignoring their own demands, most scholars are fundamentally misunderstanding the goals of this rebellion. It cannot be classified within preconceived boxes because it is like no revolt we have seen. It rejects power, but in doing so, refuses to take power itself. The Zapatistas have redefined the revolutionary project and constructed a truly new model of resistance. Of course, there is danger in this thinking. From this perspective it is easy to be lured into the postmodern analysis. 'They are new, so they must be postmodern.' Many scholars have fallen into this trap, for as their research and arguments reject the postmodernity of the Zapatistas, they nevertheless use postmodern language. "Intellectual fashion," as Daniel Nugent puts it, is a powerful and influential dope.

When scholars reject preconceived paradigms and simply try to analyze the Zapatistas for who and what they are, not what outside analysts would like them to be, it becomes clear that no paradigm yet conceived can encompass the many sides of the EZLN. This, however, does not reject ability of paradigms to aid in the attempt to understand this movement. In fact, without these paradigms scholars would be quite lost in our search for truth. They provide a variety of perspectives, each at least partially valid, and they give a foundation upon which theorist can begin to structure their

analysis. But a foundation is hardly all that scholars need to erect actual theoretical understanding.

What further complicates analysis of the Zapatistas is that their democratic nature allows the movement's ideological and tactical framework to shift and flow with the beliefs of civil society. What might appear as an indigenous rights issue could quickly change to an anti-neoliberal issue, and the first analysis is thrown for a loop. This dynamic, however, is a strength of the rebellion. Through its flexibility it is able to customize its resistance to the constantly evolving enemy. Therefore, when the state tries to smother it with military might, the EZLN's democratic decentralization of power makes such an attempt very difficult. Armed force can easily defeat a weak military unit such as the EZLN, but it is much more difficult to crush an entire social base. The Zapatistas are not simply an army representing a political group, they are a community in arms. Therefore the EZLN can only be defeated through genocide or an ideological shift within the movement itself. And the latter would not be defeat, for it would be the democratic demand of the community. Scholars must understand these innovations if they are ever to conceptualize the EZLN.

As revolutionaries fighting for true democracy, indigenous rights and global economic justice, the Zapatistas have called for global revolution. They do not fight for control of the state, or any imperialist expansion, rather they have proposed a new global social model. The breadth of their goals is difficult to conceptualize because they are so vast and so fluid. The revolution for which they fight is the extension of all liberation-based activism. The Mexican public's reaction, "We are all Zapatistas" and "We are all

Marcos,” epitomizes this unique nature of the EZLN. In one communiqué, the Zapatistas wrote:

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, a black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Isidro, and anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, an indigenous person in the streets of San Cristóbal, a gang member in Neza, a rocker on campus, a Jew in Germany, an ombudsman in the Department of Defense, a feminist in a political party, a communist in the post-Cold War period, a prisoner in Cintalapa, a pacifist in Bosnia, a Mapuche in the Andes, a teacher in the National Confederation of Educational Workers, and artist without a gallery or a portfolio, a housewife in any neighborhood in any city in any part of Mexico on a Saturday night, a guerrilla in Mexico at the end of the twentieth century, a striker in the CTM, a sexist in the feminist movement, a woman alone in a Metro station at 10 p.m., a retired person standing around in the Zocalo, a peasant without land, and underground editor, and unemployed worker, a doctor with no office, a non-conformist student, a dissident against neoliberalism, a writer without books or readers, and a Zapatista in the Mexican southeast. In other words, Marcos is a human being in the world. Marcos is every untolerated, oppressed, exploited minority that is resisting and saying ‘Enough!’⁵⁸

This is why the Zapatistas are so difficult to conceptualize. They represent a global movement that does not yet fully exist, and which is embedded with contradiction. They demand abstract concepts such as dignity, “...we saw, brothers, that all that we had was DIGNITY, and we saw that great was the shame of having forgotten it, and we saw that DIGNITY was good for men to be men again, and dignity returned to live in our hearts, and we were new again, and the dead, our dead, saw that we were new again and they called us again, to dignity, to struggle.”⁵⁹

Such ambiguity makes the movement difficult to define, but it simultaneously gives it the strength of flexibility. Perhaps this is why it is so tempting to romanticize the Zapatistas, for they allow the outsider to insert his or her own ideals into their movement. They symbolize the struggle of all movements for liberation, and encourage others to take hope from their uprising. But those outsiders must not impose their ideals onto the

Zapatistas, co-opting the movement as their own. For if they hope to understand, they must be willing to accept complexity and embrace the breadth of the movement.

Notes

- ¹ Gustavo Esteva, "The Zapatistas and People's Power," *Capital & Class* 68, (Summer 1999): 1.
- ² Philip L. Russell, *The Chiapas Rebellion* (Austin: Mexico Recourse Center, 1995), 17.
- ³ William J. Wood, "What We Learned in Chiapas," *America*, 172, no. 17 (May 1995): 3.
- ⁴ George A. Collier, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1994), 82.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 84.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, 84.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 81.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 81.
- ⁹ Luis Lorenzano, "Zapatismo: Recomposition of Labour, Radical Democracy and Revolutionary Project," in *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 126.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 126.
- ¹¹ Brian Hansen, "Globalization Backlash," *The CQ Researcher* 11, no. 33 (2001): 772.
- ¹² Russell, 16
- ¹³ John Ross, *Rebellion from the Roots: Indian Uprising in Chiapas* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1995), 26.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, 26.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 30.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 35.
- ¹⁷ Russell, 20.
- ¹⁸ John Ross, *Shadows of Tender Fury: The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995): 54.
- ¹⁹ Multinational Monitor, "Resistance is not Futile," *Multinational Monitor* 22, no. 11 (March 2001): 2.
- ²⁰ Hansen, 774.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 774.
- ²² Dan Murphy, "Reforms Falter for Mexican Indians," *Christian Science Monitor* 93, no. 197 (2001): 2.
- ²³ Esteva, 2.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 7.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 130.
- ²⁶ Lorenzano, 155.
- ²⁷ Maria Walsh, "Rebuilding Dreams," *New Internationalist* 306, (October 1998): 35.
- ²⁸ Enrique Rajchenburg & Catherine Héau-Lambert, "History and Symbolism in the Zapatista Movement," in *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 21.
- ²⁹ John Ross, "Zapata's Return," *The Nation* 265, no. 11 (1997): 6.
- ³⁰ Anthony R. Ierari, Casey Wardynski, "The Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas," *Military Review* 74, no. 10 (October 1994): 68.
- ³¹ Adam David Morton, "Mexico, Neoliberal Restructuring and the EZLN: A Neo-Gramscian Analysis," in *Globalization and the Politics of Resistance* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 2000): 261.
- ³² *Ibid*, 67.
- ³³ Lorenzano, 127.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, 127.
- ³⁵ Ierari, Wardynski, 68.
- ³⁶ Dario Fernandez-Morera, "Revolutionary Appeals," *Reason* 26, no. 3 (July 1994): 31.

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- ³⁷ Lorenzano, 130.
- ³⁸ Ibid, 131.
- ³⁹ Ibid, 155.
- ⁴⁰ John Holloway, "Zapatismo and the Social Sciences," *Capital & Class*, 78 (Autumn 2002): 156.
- ⁴¹ Daniel Nugent, "Northern Intellectuals and the EZLN," in *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 169.
- ⁴² Lorenzano, 141.
- ⁴³ Economist, "Enter, Left," *Economist* 340, no. 7982 (September 1996): 39.
- ⁴⁴ Ierari, Wardynski, 67.
- ⁴⁵ Lorenzano, 156.
- ⁴⁶ John Holloway & Eloína Peláez, *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 4.
- ⁴⁷ Esteva, 11.
- ⁴⁸ Tom Hayden, "Seeking a New Globalism in Chiapas," *The Nation* 276, no. 3 (2003): 4.
- ⁴⁹ Morton, 255-265.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, 4.
- ⁵¹ Stefan Wray, "On Electronic Civil Disobedience," *Peace Review* 11, no. 1 (March 1999): 3.
- ⁵² Ibid, 3.
- ⁵³ Ibid, 2.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, 3.
- ⁵⁵ Ross (Shadows of Tender Fury), 51.
- ⁵⁶ Morton, 265.
- ⁵⁷ Nugent, 166.
- ⁵⁸ Holloway & Peláez, 10.
- ⁵⁹ Holloway "Zapatismo and the Social Sciences" 156.

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