The Politics of Indigenous Identity: Neoliberalism, Cultural Rights, and the Mexican Zapatistas

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LIKE millions of indigenous people elsewhere, Mexican Indians demand rights to cultural self-determination. They insist on the right to live according to traditional *usos y costumbres*, to self-government in accord with local practices and customs. They demand recognition as collective units, and have fought for the inclusion of the term *pueblo*—peoples—in the constitution. Their claims for collective rights include bilingual education, the right to local and regional autonomy, and to communal land as the basis of the cultural reproduction of the group.

These demands are seen by many as a threat to both emergent and established democracies. Demands for collective rights are in tension with the commitments of liberal democracies to individual rights. Moreover, demands for autonomy and self-determination are perceived to be threatening to the national identity of the state. If democracy rests in part on an ideal of "the people" as a cohesive group that has the capacity to deliberate together to achieve consensus, then the demands of some of the people for autonomy, and for recognition of their difference, threaten to undermine the fabric of the national culture. At an extreme, the

very borders of the state are at stake, as groups make demands for self-determination and even independence.

By and large, theorists of democracy and multiculturalism have failed to develop an account of the contemporary salience of such demands for cultural recognition, focusing instead on theories of human identity to explain the politics of indigenous rights claims. They argue that demands for cultural recognition are an expression of the individual's attachment to his or her cultural group. As Will Kymlicka says, the bond between individuals and their cultural groups is simply "a fact . . . whose origins lie deep in the human condition, tied up with the way humans as cultural creatures need to make sense of their world, and that a full explanation would involve aspects of psychology, sociology, linguistics, the philosophy of mind, and even neurology" (Kymlicka, 1995: 90). Charles Taylor argues that human identity is constituted by cultural group membership, and an individual's sense of self worth is thus deeply tied to the value that others attach to his or her cultural group. As a result of this "new understanding of the human social condition," cultural recognition can be construed as a necessary component of individual recognition, and misrecognition can reasonably be considered a form of oppression (Taylor, 1994: 25-26). If cultural group attachment is a feature of the human social condition, liberal theory had better deal with cultural group rights if it is to be relevant.

Against this backdrop, the contemporary emergence of cultural claims for recognition is seen as a result of the homogenizing threats of modernity, and the frequency with which previously insular cultural units come into contact with one another and with the penetrating reach of the liberal state and neoliberal economic policies. Demands for cultural recognition seem to stem from a protective instinct in defense of the familiar and the local. Taylor states, for example, that "in pre-modern times people didn't speak of 'identity' and 'recognition'—not because people didn't have (what we call) identities, or because these didn't depend on recognition, but because these were then too unproblematic to be thematized

as such" (1994: 35). It is only in the present era that the possibility of misrecognition has generated the conditions of oppression. In a sympathetic vein, Seyla Benhabib argues that "the continuing subjection of tradition to critique and revision in a disenchanted universe make it difficult for individuals to develop a coherent sense of self and community under conditions of modernity" (1992: 81). The demand for cultural recognition springs from a crisis of identity as human beings are buffeted by misrecognition and incoherence in a (modern or postmodern?) world.

Deborah Yashar strikes a similar chord in her analysis of the recent emergence of a Latin American indigenous rights movement as a defensive reaction against external threat to the community. Yashar argues that corporatism, coupled with the failure of the state to penetrate the countryside in most Latin American countries, protected indigenous ways of life in a de facto autonomy of neglect. By adopting neoliberal economic policies that privatize communally held land and extend market forces into rural areas, however, the state began in the mid-1980s to threaten the coherence and traditions of indigenous life (Yashar, 1998, 1999). In general terms, Taylor, Benhabib, and Yashar argue that cultural group identity is salient because it is newly threatened by the coexistence of competing groups and commitments in contiguous spaces, and by the homogenizing drive of globalization.

While such theories seem to capture something of the human social condition in an atomized world in which we all suffer from weakened attachment to family and community, they capture little of the strategic and political context in which such claims are formulated and advanced. Using a case study of the emergence of the Mexican indigenous rights movement, I argue that indigenous claims for autonomy and collective rights are not an expression of the universal human need for cultural recognition. Nor do they reflect a retreat to the familiar realm of identity in the face of the incoherence and atomization of a globalizing world. Nor, finally, are they primarily an attempt to safeguard traditional prac-

tices, beliefs, and forms of life from the threat of modernity and homogenization.

Instead, indigenous identity is the condition of participation in a global political dialogue. Indigenous identity claims a political voice for many of those who have been most marginalized and oppressed by modernity, and asserts for this group the "right to have rights." Indigenous identity has forged new political spaces, strategies, and alliances that insert new political actors into the public discourse. Indigenous identity pluralizes and transforms this discourse, and is self-consciously intended as a challenge to existing hierarchies, exclusions, and patterns of state-society relations.

Indigenous identity arises, moreover, as a condition of politics itself. The condition of an indigenous political identity is not the prior existence of an ancient culture or language, nor is it the distinct set of practices that bound group membership. Indigenous identity develops political resonance only to the extent that it is employed by the state itself as a marker of inclusion and exclusion. The role of government policy in the formation of oppositional identity is the central thrust of Anthony Marx's argument that "states made race," for example, in his seminal study of Black opposition in South Africa, Brazil and the United States (Marx, 1998). Marx's argument about the role of the state in producing the terms of its own opposition was of course prefigured by Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

But why in particular did "states make race" in the 1960s and 1970s in South Africa and the United States in light of the fact that race had operated as the primary marker of exclusion in each of those societies for centuries? And why did "indigenous" fail to emerge as a salient form of political identification until the 1990s, when indigenous people have been excluded from rights in citizenship since the moment of colonization?

I argue that the rise of indigenous identity is implicated with neoliberal economic and political initiatives that have redefined the role of the state. As governments have relinquished responsi-

bility for social and economic well-being, the political leverage of class identities (like peasant and worker) has diminished. Yet almost simultaneously, the international human rights regime has expanded its definition of rights to include not only individual rights in physical and political protection but also collective rights in cultural protection. Indigenous rights in particular have emerged as a central component of the rights regime enshrined by such international organizations as the United Nations and the International Labor Organization (ILO). Activists whose capacity to advance political claims on the basis of a peasant identity that has been eviscerated by neoliberal policies have adopted an indigenous political identity in an attempt to reclaim a political voice and to establish their presence as citizens with "the right to have rights."

It is the existence of a discourse of rights that establishes the precondition of a political subject position. Individuals do not automatically occupy positions from which they can make claims on the state, but carving out a political subject position, or locating oneself within a preexisting position, is a basic condition of political agency. In this paper I develop an account of the formation of the indigenous subject position, and of the attempt of Mexico's rural poor to locate themselves as indigenous people, for the purpose of asserting a political voice. I focus additionally on the role of the Zapatista movement in raising the domestic and international profile of indigenous rights, in expanding the terms of the indigenous subject position, and in linking indigenous rights to an emerging global opposition.

The Demise of the Peasant

In Mexico, as in Latin America more broadly, the rise of the indigenous subject position has been intimately linked to the demise of the peasant as the privileged interlocutor of the corporatist state. The Mexican Revolution is the founding moment of

modern Mexico, establishing the link between the government and the peasant—by whom and on whose behalf the revolution was fought. President Lázaro Cárdenas reinforced the rural base of the government by identifying the peasant as one of the three pillars of support that sustained the ruling party (along with workers and the middle classes). The ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI) organized peasants as a social sector through top-down organizations like the Confederación Nacional Campesina (National Peasant Federation), which operated as a base of party support as well as the access point to state patronage and resources. Until the last decade of the twentieth century, Mexico's rural poor identified consistently as peasants in their attempt to position themselves as political actors with privileged access to state power.

Starting in the mid-1980s, the neoliberal turn in Mexican economic and political policy began to undercut the peasant subject position. In an attempt to recover from the 1982 debt crisis, and under intense pressure from the IMF and United States, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari implemented a series of neoliberal economic reforms that reduced the social capacity of the state and undercut the ties of social responsibility that had linked the ruling party to its mass constituent base. Neoliberal policies have forced the end of government investment in the economy; they have also led to trade liberalization aimed at boosting nonoil exports, the privatization of most public enterprises, the reduction of import tariffs to increase domestic competitiveness, the withdrawal of subsidies and price guarantees for agricultural products, and opening the agricultural sector to foreign investors to increase productivity.

In Chiapas, which depends almost solely on agricultural production, the stress of liberalization was exacerbated by the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement in 1989, when the price of coffee on the world market dropped by half. The average income of small coffee growers dropped by 70 percent between 1989 and 1993. (Harvey, 1994: 21) Between 1970 and 1990, the

percentage of the Chiapas population occupied in the agricultural sector dropped from 73 percent to 58 percent (Chiapas en Cifras, n.d.). According to the World Bank, the number of people below the absolute poverty line in Mexico rose from 17 percent in 1980 to 23 percent in 1989. Those in extreme poverty have risen from 2.5 percent to 7 percent. Income distribution has also worsened, with the Gini coefficient rising from 0.51 in 1984 to 0.55 in 1989. The share of the bottom 20 percent of the population has dropped from 4.1 percent in 1984 to 3.2 percent in 1989. The proportion of the population below the poverty line grew from 11 percent in 1994 to 17 percent in 1996 (Weiss, 1996: 76).

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) represents the pinnacle of Salinas' economic liberalization program. NAFTA's central feature is the removal of trade barriers and tariffs between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The hope of NAFTA for Mexico is that it will encourage foreign investment by companies that want to take advantage of the lowest labor costs within the NAFTA region (Weiss, 1996: 66). Part of the logic of opening up a free-trade area is the rationalization of production and consumption. Assuming full employment, noncompetitive producers will have incentives to move into other sectors of the economy, maximize productivity, and clear the market. The model collides with the reality of very high rates of unemployment and underemployment, which means that farmers who are forced out of agriculture are unable to move to another sector. They shift instead into the ranks of the permanently unemployed—or they move to Texas.

For Mexico, the production of corn has been the single most sensitive tenet of the NAFTA agreement. The United States annually produces roughly 20 times the amount of corn produced in Mexico. Mexican farmers yield an average of 30 bushels an acre, as compared with 134 bushels produced per acre in the United States. Mexican production costs are roughly 30 percent higher (Wollock, 1994: 53). The production of 1 ton of corn in eastern Chiapas can take up to 300 days of labor, measured in

man hours. The Mexican average is 8 days, and the average in the United States is 0.15 days (Chiapas en Cifras). Clearly, the United States holds the productive advantage, and under the terms of NAFTA the Mexican market has been gradually opened up to American corn, cutting the cost for Mexican consumers ("Floundering," 2002: 30).

For the 3 million Mexican farmers who currently produce corn on small inefficient fields without access to irrigation, and who with their families represent nearly one-quarter of all Mexicans, NAFTA is a disaster (Wollock, 1994: 53). Not only is there no alternative work they could productively move on to, but corn, and farming, is at the center of the communal life, not just the livelihood, of Mexico's rural population. Rigoberta Menchú describes the depth of the crisis by explaining that "Maize is the center of everything for us. It is our culture" (La Botz, 1995: 25).

It was the repeal of Article 27 of the Mexican constitution, however, which ultimately spelled the demise of the peasant as a political subject position in Mexico. Article 27 has governed land tenure in Mexico since the end of the Revolution in 1917, linking access to land directly to government patronage and thus establishing very strong ties between the peasantry and the PRI (La Botz, 1995: 25). Article 27 obliged the state to redistribute land in the form of *ejidos*—an area comprised of individual plots and communal property that could not be sold, rented, or used as collateral—to petitioners who fulfilled the necessary legal requirements. Together with a small number of designated "indigenous lands" (*comunidades agrarias*), *ejidos* account for almost one-half of all the land in Mexico, although most of it is of poor quality and under-capitalized. In Chiapas, ejidos and comunidades agrarias make up 57 percent of all exploitable land—the highest percentage in a Mexican state (Russell, 1995: 16). One-third of Chiapas' total population of 3.5 million people live on ejidos (La Botz, 1995: 25). The majority of the 2,000 ejidos and comunidades agrarias in Chiapas are located in the Lacandón rain forest, which is notoriously ill-suited to sustained agriculture, and where land

tenure is additionally threatened by environmental campaigns for the protection of the rain forest (Harvey, 1994: 22-23).

Ideological Shifts on the International Stage

The sudden and unexpected collapse of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s delegitimated the Communist ideological paradigm that had sustained and ordered much of the political opposition that drove politics in the twentieth century—in particular in Latin America. The fall of communism had the simultaneous effect of legitimating free market democracy and neoliberal global economic policies. Instead of producing the much-contested end of history, this change has led to a dramatic reorientation of both international and domestic political cleavages the world over.

Democracy has emerged as the dominant legitimating appeal of both government and opposition. Only a handful of countries dare to locate themselves outside of its covering rhetoric. This logic has had a profound effect on the character of politics almost everywhere. The revolutionary opposition has practically abandoned its revolutionary ideals. Instead, opposition politics are about the liberalization of political space, free and fair elections, and a demand for rights rooted in a democratic language of citizenship. Calls for democracy legitimate both the opposition and the government, which may differ solely over the timing or depth of the democracy they promise.

The fall of communism also had the effect of delegitimating Marxist doctrine—not just in its prescriptions for governance, but also in its class-based analysis of economic and sociopolitical structure. Such categories as “worker,” “peasant,” and “bourgeoisie” were drained of political content almost overnight. And as free market economic policies took hold in country after country, in part through neoliberal policy prescriptions imposed by the IMF and World Bank on countries in need of funding and debt relief,

corporatist ties linking workers, peasants, and the middle classes to the state bureaucracy were severed.[1] The ideological framework that sustained class-based politics collapsed, as did the political space in which class groups operated as social sectors with privileged access to state resources. And while this was especially true in Mexico, it was also part of a wider trend visible simultaneously in many parts of the world, and particularly in Latin America.

At the same time that the ideological and structural space for the political expression of class identities has been constricted, the international legal framework has opened a window to the political claims of groups constituted in identity terms—in particular as indigenous groups. The move to recognize not only states and individual citizens but also the claims of substate political actors who would contest state boundaries, comes as a major shift in the international paradigm constructed after World War II.

The governance of international society has dealt primarily with the rights and responsibilities of states. The Law of Nations, for instance, is "the science of the rights which exist between Nations or States and of the obligations corresponding to these rights." Under international law, and in international forums, indigenous groups have not qualified for rights or representation as distinct communities unless they also qualified as states—to include exclusivity of territorial domain and hierarchical centralized authority. Otherwise indigenous people have been considered citizens of states, conceptually reduced to individual status.

The system of international representation and law that was established through the United Nations at the end of World War II reinforced the inviolability of state boundaries. As colonial empires began to break apart, and the boundaries of states grew ever more contested and contestable, the UN General Assembly upheld independent statehood for colonial territories. Colonialism was delegitimated in part by the construction of a link between nation, as ethnic identity, and state. The resolution in favor of colonial independence was accompanied by a further commitment to halt the renegotiation of state boundaries as

states agreed together not to recognize the claims of substate actors that would challenge their sovereignty. For decades this norm held, and the international legal framework denied institutional and representational space to claims made by those groups that would demand collective rights as subnational groups against member states of the United Nations.

James Anaya argues that the international human rights movement has been at the forefront of the expansion of international law into the area of "cultural" rights. As human rights activists sought to moderate the doctrine of state sovereignty to justify intervention, they have also contributed to the demise of the historical link between international law and the individual/state dichotomy of human organization (Anaya, 1996: 42). Anaya explains that an ongoing international conversation on the topic of human rights has forced attention on values that support human beings' associational and cultural patterns. The concept of collective rights has begun to take hold in the articulation of human rights norms (Anaya, 1996: 42). Although international law remains state-centered, it is increasingly influenced by such nonstate actors as nongovernmental organizations and indigenous rights activists working multilaterally to increase the competency of international law over matters that were once considered the exclusive domain of the state.

The primary recourse for indigenous groups looking to bolster their cases through international law has long been Convention 107 of the International Labor Organization (ILO). The ILO developed Convention 107 in 1957 following a series of studies signaling the particular vulnerability of indigenous workers. ILO 107, however, framed a concern with the rights of indigenous people as equal individuals. Although the convention called for the recognition of customary laws and rights of collective land ownership, the collective rights of indigenous groups were not safe-guarded.

During the 1970s, indigenous rights activists, many of them anthropologists, began to organize across state lines, through

conferences, a growing body of scholarly literature, and direct appeals to international bodies. The first major development was the 1977 International Nongovernmental Organization Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations in the Americas, which formed the basis of an international indigenous rights dialogue and played an important role in publicizing and politicizing indigenous identity and grievances. Following the conference, indigenous representatives began to appear before human rights bodies, and several groups achieved consultative status within the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), now the parent body of the UN's human rights machinery.

The indigenous rights movement played an important role in the development of ILO Convention 169, a revision of Convention 107 that recognizes "the aspirations of [indigenous] peoples to exercise control over their own institutions, ways of life and economic development and to maintain and develop their identities, languages and religions, within the frameworks of the States in which they live" (Anaya, 1996: 48). In addition to the protection of cultural integrity through the recognition of social, cultural, religious, and spiritual traditions, the convention also recognizes rights in land and resources by introducing a weak but important conception of territory and habitat. Convention 169 enshrines the right of indigenous peoples to decide their own priorities for development in light of the social inequality suffered by indigenous peoples; it also recognizes the systematic violation of their citizenship and human rights. The convention came into force with ratification from Norway and—ironically—Mexico, in 1990. Convention 169 is widely perceived as a fundamental challenge to the individual/state dichotomy that has shaped international standards of justice, and it has opened a space at the international level for indigenous groups to act as legitimate political actors.

The president of the Asociación Nacional Indígena Plural por la Autonomía (National Plural Indigenous Association for Autonomy, or ANIPA), one of Mexico's most active indigenous rights

organizations, describes the importance of this political appeal to Mexican indigenous rights activists. “States themselves put the noose around their necks when they sign these international conventions. Because then there are verification committees, and other things that can be used by indigenous groups, if they know how to use them. These mechanisms are like a tiny door of entry, but if we know how to use it, it can be very successful” (interview with Margarita Gutiérrez, May 2001).

In fact, it is the international language of rights and the existence of international meetings and organizations that establish the very condition of indigenous identity. When I met with one indigenous rights activist in August 2000, I was surprised to hear her say that “the Zapatistas are not indigenous.” Although the Mexican government has often accused the rebels of taking on a false identity, I did not expect to hear this argument from a fellow member of the left. Instead, she went on to explain that the Zapatistas were not indigenous because they did not attend the Indigenous Peoples Conference annual meetings in Geneva, they were not familiar with the appropriate discourse of indigenous rights, and they were not part of the international community of indigenous rights activists (interview with Araceli Burguete, August 2000). That access to indigenous identity is determined not primarily by bloodline or ancestry but by familiarity with the international discourse and politics of indigenous rights highlights the distinctly political character of indigenous identity.

International Rights, Domestic Politics

The Mexican indigenous rights movement frames its claims in terms set at the international level, and has been able to exploit the terms of Convention 169 to legitimate its political position. The fact that the Mexican government signed the convention, and yet has failed to comply with the terms of the accord, further strengthens the Mexican indigenous rights movement. In 2001,

ANIPA formally denounced the Mexican government to the ILO following the ratification of an indigenous rights law that does not recognize the collective rights of indigenous people (ANIPA website, 2001). The ILO responded by promising to investigate, and could issue a reprimand to the Mexican government (interview with Margarito Ruiz, June 2002). Although such a reprimand lacks serious effect in the sense that punishment is unenforceable, Mexico is sensitive to international opinion and may be reluctant to risk such a negative sanction. Yet President Vicente Fox has said that he is sensitive to indigenous concerns and intends to reopen debate on the indigenous rights law.

It is the gap between law and practice that indigenous rights groups in Mexico have been able to exploit in their struggle for autonomy. Mexican indigenous rights groups use ILO Convention 169 like a life raft. As Hernández explains it, the struggle for the recognition of indigenous rights in Mexico has Convention 169 and its ratification by the Mexican government as its starting point. The movement sees in 169 the instrument through which it can force the government to comply with the legislative commitments it has already assumed (interview with Luis Hernández Cruz, June 2002) The language of self-determination, autonomy, and peoples (*pueblos*) that is used by the Mexican indigenous rights movement is the one guaranteed at the international level. Indigenous rights activist Adelfo Montes explains that the movement uses the definitional criteria established at the international level, through ILO 169 and various UN documents related to the rights of indigenous people, to delineate the boundaries of indigenous identity (Montes, 1999: 22). Mexico was censured by the ILO in 1995 for failing to implement Convention 169, and for permitting (not to say committing) grave abuses of human rights against rural indigenous workers. The EZLN has further recommended that Mexican civil society denounce the Mexican government in the ILO forum as a strategy to end the stalemate produced by the government's failure to implement the San

Andrés Accords negotiated between the government and the EZLN in 1996 ("Working Table Proposals," 1998).

ANIPA President Margarita Gutiérrez has described the importance of this international Convention to the Mexican indigenous rights movement more fully:

> It's what we hold on to. It is a base from which we can project our demands. The existence of this law gives us the right to go in front of international committees on racism, on women, in short, in front of many bodies of the UN. It gives us the room to go before the ILO to denounce the failure of the Mexican government to comply with the San Andrés Accords. It is a framework for litigation. It is the law, and although it has its deficiencies it is the only thing we have (interview with Margarita Gutiérrez, May 2001).

In anticipation of the need to comply with Convention 169, Mexico created the Commission of Justice for Indian People (CJPI) to draft a proposal to amend Article 4 of the Mexican constitution (Ewen, 1994: 36). The CJPI undertook an extensive series of opinion surveys and consultations in 1989 and 1990 to prepare the ground for legislation on the indigenous population. The consultation consisted of 136 meetings with both indigenous and nonindigenous groups, but no indigenous rights activists were consulted, and the commission did not include a single indigenous representative. Even with this fairly conservative background, the proposal to legislate indigenous rights met with considerable opposition in the Congress—not only over the content of the reform, but also over the location of the reform within the constitution. After significant delays, the initiative proposed by the president—to confer cultural rights on indigenous peoples—was passed unchanged (Hindley, 1996: 232-236). For the first time, "Indians" were formally recognized by the Mexican government. The first paragraph of Article 4 of the constitution has been amended to read:

> The Mexican nation has a multicultural composition, originally based on its indigenous peoples. The law will protect and promote the development of their languages, cultures, uses, customs, resources, and specific forms of social organization and will guarantee their members effective access to the jurisdiction of the State. In the agrarian judgments and procedures in which they are a part, their juridical practices and customs will be taken into account in the terms established by the law.

Many pundits saw the amendment of Article 4 as a sop to those who opposed the reform of Article 27 (Ewen, 1994: 36). The government sought to directly replace the guarantees of land provided to Mexican peasants by Article 27, with the guarantee of cultural protection for indigenous people. Indigenous groups nevertheless opposed the amendment from the start. Article 4 is located in Chapter 1 of the first section of the constitution, entitled "Of Individual Guarantees," rendering explicit the point that it does not recognize the collective rights of indigenous groups but limits its guarantees to individuals. Moreover, the article does not use the word "rights" at all: it pledges to protect and promote the culture and language of indigenous people, but not the people themselves.

The recognition of different cultures and languages nevertheless represented a marked departure from the ideal of *mestizaje*, and an explicit rejection of the revolutionary project of indigenous assimilation and integration. And the use of the word *pueblos* is drawn directly from the language currently favored at the international level and by indigenous rights groups themselves.

The Mexican Indigenous Rights Movement

Mexico's nascent indigenous rights movement prefigured, and had an important effect on, the Zapatista movement that emerged

in 1994. The Zapatistas in turn have played an important role in raising the domestic and international profile of indigenous rights, and of expanding the political space within which demands for indigenous rights are played out and heard. Although important political differences exist among the various strands of the indigenous rights movement, including the Zapatistas, here I focus instead on the capacity of political actors to establish new political subject positions and, in particular, on where they locate such positions. In Mexico at least, indigenous identity is intended to perform many of the same functions as peasant identity, and is perceived as a challenge to existing patterns of inequality and exclusion.[2] Indigenous rights activists hope that indigenous identity will succeed, where peasant identity failed, in forcing a fundamental reorientation of state-society relations.

That strand of the Mexican indigenous rights movement that is now represented through ANIPA and the Frente Independiente de Pueblos Indios (Independent Front of Indian Peoples, or FIPI) originated in the Mexican Communist Party and independent peasant unions. In the mid-1980s, Margarito Ruiz and Araceli Burguete came into contact with a number of Mexican anthropologists who had been involved in the design of autonomous regions in Nicaragua and believed that the Nicaraguan model could be used effectively in Mexico. As leaders of the peasant union Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos (Independent Center for Agricultural Workers and Peasants, or CIOAC), Antonio Hernández Cruz and Margarito Ruiz collaborated in the organization of FIPI, an organization with roots among the Tojolobal people of Chiapas. In fact, FIPI and the Unión de Ejidos Pueblo Tojolabál (Union of Ejidos of the Tojolabál Peoples, or UEPT) were generated from within CIOAC and shared offices during the 1980s.

Ruiz and Hernández were both congressional representatives during the Salinas administration, and the Nicaraguan model of autonomous pluri-ethnic regions (RAPs) was influential in the constitutional reform initiative to amend Article 4, which was sub-

mitted by the opposition Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD) in 1990. The model of autonomous pluri-ethnic regions locates autonomy at the regional rather than the community level. By including multiple ethnic groups within a single region, it is designed to accommodate the fact that ethnic groups are interspersed throughout much of Mexico. The creation of autonomous pluri-ethnic regions would entail a fourth level of government above the municipal level, and the redrawing of regional and municipal boundaries (interview with Margarito Ruiz). The RAPs model is also inspired by the experience of the indigenous movement's Tojolabal leadership in the Lacandón rain forest. The Lacandón is home to multiple ethnic groups that coexist, intermingled, in the relative autonomy of almost complete government neglect and isolation. Practically speaking, Tzeltals, Tzotzils, Tojolabals, Mams, and Chols are already living the RAPs model in the Lacandón.

The history of this thread of the indigenous rights movement is best recounted in the words of Araceli Burguete, who is a member of the academic team that devised the RAPs model and the wife of Margarito Ruiz, the "indigenous intellectual" who founded both FIPI and UEPT:

> In those days the groups who took an Indianist line were very few, but I mean, really extremely few. "Indianism" developed in Chiapas, in the Tojolabal region, primarily propelled by FIPI. FIPI created, in the early 1980s, the first autonomous region, of which there are now many, but the first one, which was actually called an autonomous region, was created by FIPI, and it had an advising body, the Unión de Ejidos Pueblos Tojolabales.
>
> Later for a variety of reasons, partly because Margarito went to Mexico as a congressional representative, and in that Congress, above all in 1987, 1988, there was an impulse toward legal reforms for the recognition of indigenous rights. This was very early, and in addition it was an era in

> which we had very little sympathy for legal reforms, because we all had Marxist backgrounds and we believed that the bourgeois state was reproduced through the Chamber of Deputies, the Congress, the laws, and so these were viewed as instruments of oppression. But then we began, very much under the influence of the Central Americans, and we realized that there was a particular structure to the production of indigenous politics, and the recognition of Indian rights had to pass through the structure of the state and had to be regulated through political norms. . . .
>
> [A]t that time we came into contact with other groups who were thinking the same thing we were, groups like our comrades from Oaxaca, some from the D.F., and we began something we called the National Campaign for the Literacy of Indigenous Rights. We dedicated ourselves to that for over six years, organizing workshops at the national level, from the Yaqui tribe to Quintana Roo, to plant the seed of interest in indigenous rights. At any rate, when 1992 arrived, and I place it in 1992 because that year was a very important detonator . . . it was like concentric circles that started out very small, and grew, but really expanded in 1992, as many groups started to articulate not the commemoration of 500 years, but the commemoration of resistance (interview with Araceli Burguete).

Activists agree that the commemoration of the 500-year anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas thrust the matter of the oppression of the rural poor as indigenous people squarely into the public and political arenas. Ironically, the Mexican government played an important role in politicizing indigenous opposition to the anniversary by formally protesting the Spanish use of the word "discovery" to describe the expedition. Mexico, which makes much of its mixed national heritage, suggested instead that it be called "The Encounter between Two

Worlds." The indigenous movement named the anniversary "Five Hundred Years of Resistance to Oppression."

The year 1992 was therefore characterized by heightened levels of mobilization and political activism that were, for the first time, framed in specifically indigenous terms. As ANIPA president Margarita Gutiérrez explained, "The indigenous people wanted to fix their position, politically, and to stake the claim that this was not a celebration for us, but rather an invasion. We were contesting what exactly the celebration was about. And this was very interesting, and it formed the antecedents of the movement." Gutiérrez continues, "After 1992, in 1993, we had a continental encounter in the ceremonial center of the Otomi peoples in the state of Mexico. We had representatives from Argentina, Canada, Alaska, and there were buffalo heads and leadership batons, and that type of spiritual thing, but this is where we also began with the political. In other words, to claim what is ours, to demand education, to evaluate the behavior of the governments, evaluate the laws that exist for the protection of the Indians, of which of course there are none. . . ." (interview, May 2001).

In March 1992, hundreds of indigenous people marched from Chiapas to the capital in Mexico City to protest oppression, corruption, and the reform of Article 27. Xi'Nich, the March of the Ants, covered more than 1,000 kilometers in the space of six weeks, and attracted the attention and sympathy of a significant portion of Mexican society. As Xi'Nich organizer Jerónimo Hernández described it in a letter published in the bulletin of the Catholic Church diocese of San Cristóbal, "Thanks to you we broke the silence of the centuries, and our voice was transformed into the shout of ants that was able to trespass the walls of impunity. We return to our communities with the small demands granted. They have responded to our petitions. But the centuries still weigh heavily upon us; our work is long; our mission is enormous. Today a path of hope has opened. Let us walk it together. Let us not walk alone" ("Encuentros," 1992: 39).

Burguete agrees with Gutiérrez that 1992 was a crucial turning point. “In 1992, for the first time, Mexican society turns its gaze on the Indians. That is to say if 1994 had happened in 1990, Mexican society would not have responded the same way to the Zapatista uprising. Those four years made an enormous difference. Between 1990 and 1992 the idea of indigenous visibility was beginning to be cemented.” But, she further admits, “At this point perhaps it was still the folkloric gaze” (interview with Araceli Burguete).

Institutional changes, such as ILO Convention 169, Article 4, and the government’s Nuevo Indigenismo (New Indigenism) policy had begun to open a space for the production of indigenous claims. Quincentenary protests raised the profile of a political identity specifically framed in indigenous terms. And a small group of indigenous rights activists were working hard to mobilize an indigenous rights agenda in Mexico. Nevertheless, “indigenous” had yet to develop resonance as a political subject position. Not only is it possible for people to move among subject positions, it is not uncommon to lack, or lose, a political subject position altogether. The formation of a subject position from which political claims can be credibly legitimated, and from which an individual can operate as a political actor, is the first step toward claim making, and one that was still under way at the start of the Zapatista uprising in January 1994.

The Zapatistas themselves were embedded in the organizational and ideological history of 20 years of peasant struggles in Chiapas, in the Marxist lines of the 1970s, in liberation theology, and in the revolutionary politics of Central American uprisings. Moreover, the dominant political cleavage at the local level was between those who opted to work within and through government structures to achieve their goals, and those who chose armed struggle. Yet at the wider domestic and even international levels, “indigenous” had begun to replace “peasant” and “worker” as the relevant category of rural political organization. All of these

paradigms operated simultaneously on the political location of the Zapatista uprising.

The first statements of the Zapatistas (known formally as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional—Zapatista National Liberation Army, or EZLN) identified the movement as a national uprising of an unspecified social base with primarily redistributive demands. The First Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle, issued on January 2, 1994, opens with the statement, "We are the product of 500 years of struggle." Yet the struggle is defined broadly against not only Spanish colonizers and their descendants but also against North American imperialism, the French empire, and the nineteenth-century dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. It invokes the memory of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata as "poor men just like us," and identifies the Zapatistas simply as "the dispossessed" without identifying the root of dispossession—as peasants, indigenous people, or other. The EZLN initially drew heavily on symbols of Mexican nationalism, positioning itself as the inheritor of the Mexican Revolution, and of the progressive and nationalistic political projects of such Mexican heroes as Hidalgo, Morelos, and Vicente Guerrero. The EZLN issued a list of 11 demands: for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace.

Yvon le Bot, whose authoritative book on the Zapatista uprising is based on interviews with Subcomandante Marcos himself, argues that the EZLN simultaneously inscribed itself in the tradition of Ché Guevara and in the socialist revolutionary experiments of Nicaragua and El Salvador. He argues that the Central American influence can be read through the army's use of the colors red and black (a symbol of "our working people on strike," according to Marcos), through the name National Liberation Army, and through the use of the language of socialism, class conflict, and dictatorship of the proletariat that initially framed Zapatista discourse. As late as October 1994, Marcos defended the conceptual value of historical materialism and theoretical Leninism (Lebot, 1997: 69-70), and he continues to describe the conditions of the

uprising in those terms: "For us Mexico was a neocolonial state, under the imperial domination of the United States, and the transition through democracy to socialism could only be achieved through national liberation" (Le Bot, 1997: 128).

Within this paradigm, the revolution was predicated on an uprising of the peasant and working classes, and on a class-based analytical framework of politics. In the first week of the conflict, one Zapatista commander explained that the army had been named for Zapata "because he was a peasant leader. He was the one who wanted to give us land. But he was later killed by the bourgeoisie" ("No es Tiempo," 1994: 10A). Marcos complained that one of the mistakes the Zapatista leadership made was failing to establish links with the working classes (Salazar Devereaux et al., 1994).

The EZLN was nevertheless somewhat ambivalent in its self-description, moving easily between indigenous and peasant identities that shared the common space of poverty and marginalization. On January 6 the EZLN issued a communiqué explaining: "Since the 1st of January our Zapatista troops began a series of political military actions whose primordial objective is to alert the Mexican people and the rest of the world to the miserable conditions in which millions of Mexicans live and die, especially we indigenous people" (EZLN, 1994). The communiqué goes on to name "democracy and liberty as the necessary components of the improvement of the social and economic conditions of the dispossessed."

The EZLN did not initially adopt an indigenous rights-based framework for analyzing the structural forces of marginalization and oppression that liberation would need to overcome. Marcos instead appeared to use the terms "peasant" and "indigenous" interchangeably to refer to a single group of people notable for their poverty and oppression, not primarily to indicate a distinctive cultural or linguistic tradition. Marcos' discourse occasionally inserted "indigenous people" into the analytic space occupied in Marxist analysis by "the vanguard of the proletariat" or by the

peasant as the engine of revolution. "Indigenous" did not initially stake out a new political space or define new possibilities of political claim-making. The EZLN did not anticipate the potential for a specifically indigenous challenge to the Mexican state, or of an identity-based analysis of oppression.

The Zapatistas were strongly influenced from the outset by both international and domestic indigenous rights activists who saw in the EZLN a way of raising the profile of indigenous claims and of forging a link to their own struggles. On January 17, 1994, Rigoberta Menchú sent an open letter to the EZLN entitled "Indigenous Initiative for Peace in Chiapas." The letter reported on the results of two meetings that had already been held by "distinguished voices of the indigenous rights movement" to promote an indigenous initiative for peace in Chiapas in defense of the rights of indigenous people. The letter was signed by indigenous rights activists and leaders from New Zealand, the Philippines, Canada, Norway, Alaska, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Chile, and Mexico (Menchú Tum, 1994). A number of the other international nongovernmental organizations that denounced human rights abuses in Chiapas also identified the vulnerability of Mexico's indigenous population as their primary concern (Op-ed columns, 1994).

Many (though not all) domestic figures and news reports similarly emphasized the Indian character of the rebels. On January 15, the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* published a statement issued by a network of 120 civil society groups in Chiapas in which they called for a new relationship between the Indian population and the state (Advertisement, 1994). *La Jornada* also reported that the indigenous army chose January 1 as the date for the uprising because it marked the transition between traditional leaders according to the indigenous *cargo* system, in which community members rotate responsibility for festivals, care of the church, and other matters of community governance. The EZLN itself was emphasizing a struggle against neoliberalism at the time, however, and the cargo system has not been in effect for decades in

the Cañadas—the heart of the uprising (Leyva-Solano, 1999: 70). Indeed, it is notable that in the Lacandón jungle, where support for the Zapatistas is strongest, indigenous traditions and language communities have not been intact since the mid-twentieth century. Over the last 50 years, the Lacandón has been colonized by many different linguistic, religious, and ethnic groups that live intermingled in the same communities, speaking a mixture of languages but maintaining few of the traditions of the communities from which they came.

Araceli Burguete described the eagerness of indigenous rights activists to get involved in the politics of the uprising: "In 1994, when the Zapatistas emerged, we came back. My husband and I had been living in Mexico City, and on the second of January, Margarito took the first flight after he heard about the uprising. Everyone was fleeing the state, and he was struggling to get in! So, he came first, and then I followed him." Margarito Ruiz immediately became involved in the creation of the Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinas (State Advisory of Indigenous and Peasant Organizations, or CEOIC), a government-backed council of mainly independent peasant, worker, and indigenous social groups in Chiapas. The government hoped, through CEOIC, that it would be able to isolate the EZLN and to undermine its claim to represent civil society in Chiapas. At its height CEOIC included 285 Chiapan political organizations, of various political persuasions, in a network that was intended to act as the privileged government interlocutor in the search for solutions to the crisis.

In March, the first national council of indigenous and peasant groups met in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, with 500 participants from over 80 organizations nationwide. One of the important discussions to emerge from this meeting was a self-conscious recognition of *indianistas y campesinistas*—Indianists and peasants—as two separate strands of political organization that did not occupy the same political space even if they claimed to speak for the same group of rural poor. At this meeting the issue

of how to reconcile demands for land, credit, and commercialization with indigenous rights was placed squarely on the table, and peasant and indigenous activists agreed to form a broad alliance intended to strengthen each other's political base (Pérez Ruiz, 2000: 144-146).

Despite serious and ongoing tensions between the Chiapas indigenous rights groups and the EZLN,[3] the Zapatista investment in an indigenous rights agenda was solidified at the National Democratic Convention (CND) in August 1994. One of the CND working groups presented a document, "The Indian Peoples: Toward Democracy and Peace in the Future. Six Principles, Six proposals." The document was adopted by the EZLN, thereby deepening its own political program, imbuing its democratic agenda with an ethnic tint, and establishing a set of concrete proposals to resolve the structural subordination of indigenous peoples within the nation (Pérez Ruiz, 2000: 155). This position formed the nucleus of the EZLN platform the following year in negotiations on the rights of indigenous people under the auspices of the San Andrés Accords.

Conclusion

By the time the Zapatistas entered negotiations with the government two years after the uprising, the leaders of the movement had fully embraced an indigenous identity. Since 1994, the EZLN has played a crucial role in raising the domestic political profile of indigenous rights, and in thereby carving out the space of an indigenous subject position. Groups demanding indigenous rights have spoken before Congress; the Office of the President was expanded to include a representative for indigenous peoples who answers directly to the executive; and the Congress ratified a new Indigenous Law in 2001. While many of these apparent concessions have been criticized as meaningless—or worse, as a strategy to mollify adherents of the indigenous political agenda—it is

nevertheless true that in the last decade the issue of indigenous rights has insinuated itself into the mainstream of Mexican politics. "Indigenous" now establishes a recognizable political location with a powerful legitimating discourse.

The indigenous rights movement has been able to take more space than it has been given in part because of the alliances and strategies it has developed at the international level. Mexican representatives were instrumental in persuading the United Nations to establish a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. At the moment representatives to the Permanent Forum meet annually in New York City for the purpose of developing an agenda for political action. The forum is focused on influencing other UN bodies that make decisions that affect indigenous populations, and in applying pressure to individual member states to recognize indigenous rights.

The EZLN was also instrumental in developing links between the indigenous rights agenda and other elements of a global oppositional dialogue. Through the EZLN, the discourse of indigenous rights has established common ground with women's rights, labor, environmentalism, and antiglobalization. The Zapatista Internet listserv, which has been maintained continuously since 1994, regularly sends EZLN communiqués and newsclips to tens of thousands of sympathizers worldwide. Most of those who have signed onto the listserv would count themselves part of a global opposition, a multisonorous voice of dissent against persisting hierarchies and exclusions. Through these links, Mexico's rural poor have asserted their voice in global politics. In April 2003, for example, the Zapatista autonomous communities joined in the worldwide protests against war in Iraq, posting signs and manifestos against the war in cities and villages throughout Chiapas.

While the EZLN was itself transformed by a nascent indigenous rights discourse and by the bankruptcy of the class-based language of revolution that it initially invoked, the movement has also been instrumental in pressing the boundaries of indigenous rights poli-

tics. Indigenous identity has been forged as a political subject position through politics itself. The precise meaning and location of indigenous rights in Mexico is bound up with the particular history, alliances, and politics of that case, both burdened and empowered by the visibility and popularity of the Zapatista uprising.

Nevertheless, the claim to indigenous identity has proliferated throughout the world as a result of the development of a framework for indigenous rights located at the international level. The world's rural poor have employed indigenous identity in order to carve out a space for political activism at the domestic level, and have been able, by invoking their identity as indigenous people, to enter a global political dialogue. Moreover, indigenous rights activists themselves recognize the strategic power of indigenous identity and the role it plays in their struggle for political voice. Although indigenous identity locates them in a distinct political space, from which they can establish new alliances and make different demands, indigenous identity plays a role that is functionally similar, in establishing political voice, to peasant identity in a prior era. As indigenous rights activist (and former member of the Mexican Communist Party) Luis Hernández Cruz explained to this author, "the proletarian struggle, the workers struggle is one path, but the struggle of the indigenous peoples for autonomy and self-determination, that is another path. They are both about social justice, they come together, they reinforce one other. The struggle is something one needs to search for, one needs to find the terms of struggle. There is no other way but to seek it out" (interview with Luis Hernández Cruz, June 2002). In contemporary politics, indigenous identity has provided the terms of struggle for many of the world's poor and dispossessed.

Notes

[1] Deborah Yashar (1998) emphasizes the demise of the corporatist state as an explanation for the rise of indigenous identity in Latin America. I agree with her that this is an important element, but I focus more attention on the transformation of ideas.

[2]Indigenous identity can occupy a variety of political locations however—depending on the politics of mobilization. The pan-Mayan movement in Guatemala for example, has explicitly located itself in opposition to peasant identity—in the context of a post-war politics that positions the peasant very differently from the peasant in Mexico.

[3]Who vied for visibility, control of the ideological agenda, and access to government interlocutors, even as they attempted to forge a common front.

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