

Rebellion in Chiapas: The Colonial History of a New World Disorder

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Just hours into the new year, several hundred -- and possibly as many as 2,000 -- armed peasants attacked and briefly occupied four towns, San Cristobal de Las Casas, Ocosingo, Altamirano, and Las Margaritas, and the Rancho Nuevo regional military base in the southern state of Chiapas, Mexico. Constituting themselves into the self-styled Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), which takes its name after Emiliano Zapata, a legendary figure in Mexican history for his defense of the rights of the poor and the landless, these guerrillas issued a "Declaration of War", and stated their intent to "advance to the capital of the country" after engaging and overcoming the Mexican Federal Army.¹ Although the government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari at first indicated that it would be willing to negotiate with the rebels and accordingly did not go on the offensive, within a couple of days the Mexican Army was brought into Chiapas, and the guerrillas retreated into the hills and the safety of dense forests. Over a hundred casualties had been reported in the first few days of fighting. Amidst widespread reports of atrocities committed by troops and of summary executions of captured rebels,² the government appears to have moved swiftly to silence its critics and appease the poor peasants of Chiapas, promising new food programs, farm subsidies, and other aid. By the early part of the second week, between 10,000-15,000 soldiers had been moved into the area, and the four towns had been retaken by the army. Casualties had mounted swiftly; the bombing by air of many villages, and the death of numerous civilian non-combatants, evoked much criticism. Salinas removed the Interior Minister, Patrocinio Garrido, formerly the governor of Chiapas, and chose Manuel Camacho Solis, formerly mayor of Mexico City and Salinas' foreign minister, to negotiate with the rebels. On January 12, the government declared a unilateral cease-fire, and offered the rebels amnesty, an offer

¹"Declaration of the Zapatista National Liberation Army", as reproduced in Dan La Botz, *The Chiapas Rebellion: A Political Analysis*, Solidarity Pamphlets (Detroit: Solidarity, 1994).

²Juanita Darling, "Aircraft Strafe, Bomb Fleeing Mexican Rebels", *Los Angeles Times* (5 Jan. 1994), p. A1, reported that in Ocosingo, 25 bodies, mainly of guerrillas, were strewn in the streets and the village market, "where five bodies showed signs of execution, lying face down in a row with their hands behind their backs." The bishop of San Cristobal, Samuel Ruiz, described the executions and bombing as "excessive measures" in violation of international rules of war.

to which Commandante Marcos, the masked leader of the Zapatistas in whose name the guerrillas have released their communiqués, responded with the following words: "What are they going to pardon us for? For not dying of hunger? For not keeping quiet in our misery? For not having humbly accepted the weighty historic burden of scorn and abandonment?"³ Fighting nonetheless came to a standstill, and in mid-February the rebels even released their prize hostage, Absalon Castellanos Dominguez, the 70-year old former Governor of Chiapas whose administration was infamous for corruption and abuses of human rights, and whom a tribunal convened by the rebels had sentenced to "a life of hard labor in one of the communities that had suffered under his rule."⁴ There has been some reluctance on part of the leaders of the rebellion to engage with direct negotiations with the government, for the precedent of 1919, when the Government of Mexico arranged for the assassination of Emiliano Zapata while pretending to bring him to the negotiation table, has very much been on their mind as their written communications suggest.⁵ However, as of early March, negotiations had been commenced.

The rebellion in Mexico, as many commentators have noted, could not have come at a more embarrassing moment for the government of President Salinas. When Salinas first came into power nearly six years, he almost at once initiated a program for the economic transformation of Mexico. Although not a 'Chicago boy',⁶ Salinas was trained at Harvard, another notorious seat of unimaginative economic thinking and political and intellectual conservatism, and he proceeded to implement his plan to set Mexico on the path of a free market economy by auctioning state-owned firms, opening the economy to virtually unhindered foreign investment, drastically cutting import tariffs from 100% to no more than 20%, and repudiating the constitutionally-ordained obligations of the government to provide for the redistribution of land. In a report furnished by the Bank of Mexico, it is revealed that Mexico in 1992 had only 217 state-owned firms, compared to 1,555 in 1982: among the state industries which had been sold are the telephone company, Aeromexico (Mexico's international airlines), and Mexicana (the state airlines). The largest private-sector employer in Mexico today is General

³Juanita Darling, "Masked Rebel Cuts Swath Through Mexico", *Los Angeles Times* (19 February 1994), p. 10.

⁴Anthony DePalma, "Mexican Negotiator Meet Rebels As Former Governor is Released", *New York Times* (17 Feb. 1994), p. A7.

⁵For details of the rebellion and the subsequent negotiations, I have followed reports in the *New York Times*, besides a great many other sources, some of which I will have occasion to cite.

⁶This is an allusion to the fact that many dictators and authoritarian governments, especially in Latin America, that gravitated towards free market policies were coached by economists associated with, or trained at, the University of Chicago, the preeminent school of right-wing economics in the United States.

Motors; and if in 1974 wages were one-fourth of what they were in the United States, by early 1990 wages in Mexico had already decreased to 10% of what they were in the United States. Foreign investment in Mexico had risen five-fold from \$10 billion in 1980 to over \$50 billion in 1992.⁷ Section X of the Mexican Constitution of 1917, which guaranteed peasants "communal land", even if it entailed the expropriation of land at the expense of the Federal Government, was repealed in 1992. Thus, while three years ago there were 25,000 unresolved land claims in Mexico, today there are fewer than 3,000 of these cases, the vast majority of them having been resolved by turning down the claims.⁸ The crowning achievement of Salinas, as he himself saw it, was Mexico's entry into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). With the ratification of NAFTA, Salinas imagined that Mexico had been set on the irreversible path towards greatness as a modern, industrialized nation, a fantasy that he shares with many Third World leaders; the rebels saw it quite differently, for as Commandante Marcos put it, "The free-trade agreement is a death certificate for the Indian peoples of Mexico, who are dispensable for the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. We rise up in arms against this death sentence from Carlos Salinas."⁹ Thus, when the rebellion broke out, just hours after NAFTA went into effect and in the year when national elections are due to take place, it was a rude reminder of the presence of what Jorge Castaneda (and others) call the "Other Mexico."¹⁰ This is the Mexico where, despite vastly increased social spending by the government, and the initiation of widely-touted anti-poverty programs such as "Solidarity", 16% of the population is officially described as living in "extreme poverty", and another 27% as "poor"; a quarter of the labor force is out of work, but Mexico now has seven billionaires, as many as Britain.¹¹

As in many countries that have agreed to come under the tutelage of the United States and the IMF, the disparities in Mexico have increased enormously; 10% of the population controls 41.4% of the national wealth.¹² But to understand why the rebellion took place in Chiapas, and why it has taken its present (somewhat archaic) form, given the demise of the left throughout the world, and particularly guerrilla-type left

⁷La Botz, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, p. 13; "Mexico: The revolution continues", *The Economist* (22 January 1994), pp. 20.

⁸See "Rage in a Village in Mexico Where Land is Life", *New York Times* (27 Feb. 1994), p. A10.

⁹La Botz, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, p. 3.

¹⁰Jorge G. Castaneda, "The Other Mexico Reveals Itself", *Los Angeles Times* (5 Jan. 1994), p. B7.

¹¹"Mexico: The revolution continues", *The Economist* (22 January 1994), p. 19.

¹²Daniel Dombey, "Mexico revolt set to go on", *New Statesman & Society* (14 January 1994), p. 11.

movements in Latin America, we need to embed the rebellion both in the history of Chiapas since the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish conquistadores, and in the geopolitics of the new world order today. The colonial past of Chiapas may appear to lie at a great remote, but as the guerrillas of the Zapatista Army stated in their "Declaration of War", "We are a product of 500 years of struggle: first against slavery, then during the war of Independence against Spain led by Insurgents, then to avoid being absorbed by North American imperialism . . ." ¹³ One of the four towns captured by the rebels, San Cristobal de Las Casas, takes its name from the Dominican friar Bartolome de las Casas, who was to accompany Cortes on his conquest of Mexico, and subsequently acquired fame as the protector of the rights of Indians. In 1544, when he was already seventy years old, Las Casas agreed to take charge of the poor and little-known bishopric of Chiapas, presumably to aid his brother Dominicans in their effort to preach the faith without the use of force, a subject on which he had already written his treatise, *The Only Way of Attracting All People to the True Religion*.¹⁴ Las Casas came to Chiapas bearing in hand the New Laws signed by Charles V of Spain, which governed the conduct of the Spanish colonists in the Americas, and forbade them to enslave Indians. The *encomenderos*, the colonists and descendants of conquistadores, inveighed against the New Laws; an attempt is said to have been made on Las Casas' life. In 1547, Las Casas returned to Spain; a few years later, he was to take part in a memorable debate at Valladolid between Juan Gines de Sepulveda and himself on the two-fold question of whether some men are (as Aristotle had maintained) 'slaves by nature', and whether a just war could be waged against the Indians. Las Casas won that debate; he was now to devote the rest of his long life to exposing the cruelties perpetrated by the Spanish upon the Indians.

Las Casas could achieve very little, however, when we consider that it was not until the early 1980s that Indians were allowed on the side-walks of San Cristobel de Las Casas.¹⁵ The history of Chiapas has been a gravely troubled and unfortunate one from the earliest days; what remained of the Indian population after the conquest was further decimated by disease, a measles epidemic in 1529 taking a heavy toll. Two-thirds of the indigenous population of Chiapas and Guatemala is estimated to have been wiped out between 1540 and 1582 on account of smallpox, pneumonia, bubonic plague, and famine. The traditional social structures were being rendered obsolete; on the other hand, a struggle for the control of the Indian population, and the right to direct the local social

¹³"Declaration of the Zapatista National Liberation Army", reproduced in La Botz, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, p.4.

¹⁴See Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959), pp. 28-29.

¹⁵"Mexican Troops Battling Rebels", *New York Times* (3 January 1994), p. A1.

and political transformations, was being waged between the encomenderos, the descendants of the conquistadores who had acquired large properties in land, and the Dominicans who insisted on promulgating the teachings of Las Casas.¹⁶ Among the Indian elites who were thought to have converted to Christianity, many continued to indulge in "idolatrous worship" in their private lives, offering traditional ceremonies to ancient gods. Thus originated the "Conspiracy of the Twelve Apostles", a reference to twelve men of principal Indian lineages who, though known to be Christians, had been accused of partaking in a "clandestine cult" that offered "demonic rites" against the Christian religion.¹⁷ Shamanism was to become the vehicle for cultural resistance, and as some scholars have suggested, may have contributed to nativist movements of later periods in Chiapas, Yucatan, and Guatemala. The history of rebellion in Chiapas, in any case, is as old as that of the conquest, and it is in the framework of the Tzeltal Revolt of 1712, the Jacinto Canek Rebellion in 1761, the Anastaco Tzal Revolt in 1820, the Tzotzil rebellion of 1868, and the long-lasting Caste War in Yucatan that we must place the recent rebellion in Chiapas. In the Caste War, among the first things that the Mayas, who had risen against their European overlords, did was to invade the city center of Valladolid, from which they were banned. Their battle cry, it is said, was "Kill everyone in trousers!"¹⁸

Although the revolution of 1910-1917 appeared to promise sweeping changes, particularly agrarian reform, the redistribution of land was left to the big landlords and ranchers, the very gentry that was opposed to the dismemberment of their haciendas; moreover, the remoteness of Chiapas, which lies at the southern end of Mexico, to the east of the state of Oaxaca and north of Guatemala, of which it was once a part, engendered an attitude of indifference among the bureaucrats in Mexico City. The revolution reaffirmed the rights of Indians to collective ownership of land, and during the presidency of Lazaro Cardenas in the 1930s millions of hectares of land were redistributed; another such redistribution in Chiapas took place in the 1950s and 1960s, raising the number of families on *ejidos*, or collective farms, from 71,000 in 1950 to 148,000 in 1970. The land so distributed, however, often had the poorest soil; and

¹⁶Amos Megged, "Accommodation and Resistance of Elites in Transition: The Case of Chiapa in Early Colonial Mesoamerica", *Hispanic American Historical Review* 71, 3 (1991), pp. 479-80.

¹⁷Kevin Gosner, "Caciques and Conversion: Juan Atonal and the Struggle for Legitimacy in Post-Conquest Chiapas", *the Americas* 49, 2 (October 1992), pp. 115-29.

¹⁸Nelson Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatan* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1964). Clothes can be, needless to say, as effective as signifiers as anything else. In the town of Oxchuc in Chiapas, the most prominent left-leaning civil association is the "Tres Nudos", which refers to the local style of dress in which men tie long sashes in three knots around their waists. See "Elizabeth Kadetsky, "Chiapas: Rise of the Mestizos", *LA Weekly* (28 January - 3 February 1994), p. 14.

without financial support, the productivity of these *ejidos* has not only remained very low, often not even enough to support the families that farm the land, but has been vastly outstripped by private agriculture. As the rebels have pointed out at the peace talks, redistribution of land will not suffice; the land must be productive, peasants must be offered the use of technology, and the infrastructure (such as roads) has to be available to get produce to the market. Cattle ranches, meanwhile, were exempt from being parcelled out, and over the years the population of the herds has grown enormously; if in the Highland Clearances human beings were driven out to make room for sheep, flung (in Marx's memorable description) "onto the sea-shore" to live as amphibians,¹⁹ in Chiapas cattle is replacing people. Between 1960 and 1976, the area in Chiapas used for livestock grew from 22% to 49%; and 6,000 rancher families, who together constitute less than 1% of the population of Chiapas, hold the title to nearly half of the total land area of Chiapas. Both ranchers and the big landlords have consistently hired thugs to intimidate Indians and make them relinquish their land; as Amnesty International, Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, and numerous other organizations have documented on previous occasions, human rights abuses in Chiapas are legion.²⁰ Unable to make a living off the land, the peasants in Chiapas have been driven into the Lacandon forest; home to 12,000 people in 1960, the Lacandon now has 300,000 people, and the ecosystem, already rendered fragile by illegal logging and oil drilling, now appears to be on the verge of collapse. War, in more than one way, has come to the forest.²¹

If massive inequities in land ownership suggest why Chiapas is ridden with deprivation, other indicators also point to the problem of endemic poverty. In Chiapas, the rate of literacy is 69.9%, while for Mexico as a whole the rate is 87.4%. In 1990, only 58.4% of the households in Chiapas had running water, and only 30% have electricity today, although a quarter of the electricity consumed in Mexico is generated in Chiapas; the number of hospital beds and telephones relative to the population is the lowest in the region. When we consider that Chiapas has the largest population of Indians of any state, some of the reasons for the neglect of this region become all too apparent. While across Mexico 7.5% people speak an Indian language, in Chiapas this figure stands at 26.4%; moreover, between 30-40% of the Indians don't speak Spanish at all.²² The bishop of San

¹⁹Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), Vol. I, p. 892.

²⁰"Human Rights, Chiapas, Spring 1993", *New York Times* (7 Jan. 1994), Op-ed page.

²¹La Botz, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, pp. 6-8; Anthony DePalma, "Rage in a Village in Mexico Where Land is Life", *New York Times* (27 February 1994), p. A10; Homero Aridjis, "Slaves and Guerrillas, Forests and Blood", *New York Times* (5 January 1994), p. A11.

²²"A Profile of Chiapas", Embassy of Mexico (Washington, D.C.), 7 January 1994; *New York Times*, 9 January 1994, sec. 4, p. 6.

Cristobal, Samuel Ruiz, controversial for his supposed espousal of "liberation theology", has estimated that in 1993 alone 15,000 Indians died of hunger, disease, and violence.²³ One third of the population is without any access to health care. 19% of the work-force of 1.12 million in Chiapas is without any income; another 40% earn less than the federally mandated minimum wage of \$3.33 per day, and only 15% of the work-force earns \$6.67 or more a day. While per capita GDP for Mexico amounted to \$3,250 in 1991, in Chiapas it was \$1,710; moreover, a third of the GDP in Chiapas is generated in the agricultural sector, more than in any other state.²⁴

Considering the history of Chiapas, the grinding poverty of the region, and most fundamentally the fact that the restructuring of the Mexican economy has placed certain segments of the population outside the pale of reform and modernization, banished them into an "economic exile" and cultural isolation,²⁵ it is ludicrous to suppose that there were not enough grounds for dissent and rebellion. I have not even accounted for the enormous pressure exerted on Chiapas by the presence of thousands of Guatemalan and other Central American refugees in Chiapas, or for the ferment created by proselytizing among Protestant missionaries,²⁶ or the part played by mega-projects of the state, such as the construction of huge hydroelectric dams all across the state, in effecting the displacement of a large number of Indians and disrupting the traditional patterns of life. Predictably, however, when the rebellion broke out, the first response of the government was to deny its indigenous origins and attribute it to nefarious influences from across Mexico's borders. The rebels are said to have been influenced wholly by the Sandinistas, left-guerrillas in El Salvador, and other Central American revolutionary movements;²⁷ other figures in the government, and their lackeys in the media and the universities, have even sought to portray the rebellion as an outcome of the 'drug wars'. The pathetic attempt to discredit the rebellion in Chiapas as a (in President Salinas' words) "foreign import", which is reminiscent of the Indian government's persistent resort to the 'foreign hand' in mitigation of the refusal of certain marginalized sections in Indian society to accede to the notion of sovereignty held by the ruling elites, makes a mockery

²³Martin Roberts, "Revolt of the other Mexico", *New Statesman and Society* (7 Jan. 1994), pp. 10-11.

²⁴"A Profile of Chiapas", Embassy of Mexico, Washington, D.C., dated 7 January 1994; see also *New York Times* (9 Jan. 1994), Sec. 4, p. 6.

²⁵George A. Collier, "Rebellion Against Economic Exile", *Wall Street Journal*.

²⁶In the early 1950s, missionaries belonging to the Summer School of Linguistics established themselves among the Indians; at least a third of the population of Chiapas now are Protestants, and Catholicism has sought to strengthen its hand through "liberation theology" and other measures.

²⁷See coverage in the *New York Times*, 2-7 Jan. 1994; Martin Roberts, "Revolt of the Other Mexico", *New Statesman and Society* (7 Jan. 1994), p. 11.

of the injustices to which the Indian population of Chiapas has been subjected for nearly five hundred years; and as for the other attempt to render the rebellion into an affair of criminal and lawless elements, the Zapatistas themselves provided a most fitting reply in their opening salvo: "Beforehand, we refuse any effort to disgrace our just cause by accusing us of being drug traffickers, drug guerrillas, thieves, or other names that might be used by our enemies."²⁸

It was less than two years ago that the world 'celebrated' the quinentennial of the 'discovery' of the Americas by a marauding specimen of Christendom by the name of Christopher Columbus, and it is even more recently that the blood-curling activities in Peru of the Maoist revolutionary party, Sendero Luminoso ('The Shining Path'), which appeared to have been undertaken in partial emulation of the blood sacrifices carried out by the Incas, were arrested with the capture and incarceration of Abimail Guzman, the leader of the Shining Path. The rebellion in Chiapas, the events in Peru, and the recent reminders of the history of the enslavement of indigenous populations in Central and Latin America by the enactment of grotesque tributes to Columbus and the conquistadores who came in his wake must be viewed collectively as pointing not only to unresolved problems from a torturous and bloody past, but to the continuing attempts by the West to strangulate large chunks of the world's population. The West's endeavors at domination may have taken the form of garrotting 'underdeveloped' countries by coercing them to accept GATT and the dictates of the IMF and the World Bank, not to mention the outright decimation of 'hostile' nations, as the relentless bombing of Iraq and other acts of militaristic adventurism by the U.S. and the U.K. have shown. The rebellion in Chiapas provides, then, a faint glimmer of hope that the 'New World Order' will not so easily be put into place, and it suggests even that disorder is to be preferred to the regime of order that tyrannical elites posing as torch-bearers of freedom are seeking to impose throughout the world.

²⁸"Declaration of the Zapatista National Liberation Army", in La Botz, *The Chiapas Rebellion*.