

Prologue to the Essay Series: What I Saw at the Revolution

In the summer of 1996, two and a half years after the Zapatista armed uprising, Subcomandante Marcos, speaking on behalf of the EZLN in a public relations coup unrivaled by many heads of state, attracted to the Lacandon selva four thousand non-Mexicans, young, idealistic, from forty-two different countries, clad not in ski masks but in what might have been the hippie clothing of their parents, retrieved from a quarter century's storage in attic trunks. Thus clad in the magic of idealism, they converged by plane, bus and caravan in the southern state of Chiapas, Mexico, to respond to Marcos' invitation to meet.

Along with them arrived the widow of French President Mitterrand, half a dozen world-class writers and intellectuals, a caravan from Pastors For Peace, and, into San Cristóbal de Las Casas, uninvited but intrigued, us: two aging folks from Boston, one a physics professor (him) and one a teacher of ESL (her).

Invitations were out to García Marquez and Oliver Stone. The FZLN opened an office in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas to register attendees. Gossip had it that anyone with a press credential could attend the upcoming discussion grandly called Encuentro Inter-Continental por la Humanidad y Contra el Neoliberalismo: an intercontinental meeting on behalf of humanity and against the policies of neoliberalism. Faxes and phone calls hummed through the business of the day. Frente Zapatista Liberación Nacionál, the political arm of the Zapatista army.

My companion George and I had planned our summer

around studying Spanish at an immersion language school. We wanted to be close to the action in Chiapas and we found a school in San Cristóbal (pop. 75,000) where we enrolled. George was a student of Beginner Spanish, and I was a student of Intermediate Spanish in the morning, and a teacher of ESOL in the afternoon, so that my day was divided into two three-hour sections of teaching and learning. Being a tourist is the best camouflage any politically inclined person can hope for; and I think this strategy was well understood by other “students” who, like us, knew that San Cristóbal was where the action was.

In the face of the power structure that oppressed them the EZLN demanded protection for subsistence agriculture and communal life styles threatened by timber cutting, hydro-electric development, oil exploration, land expropriation and ecological destruction, activities supported by federal governments (theirs and ours). The Zapatistas simultaneously called for deep structural reforms to the Mexican political system to allow communities local power over the provision of social services and the management of their resources.

Whatever the Mexican authorities’ hopes (or the language school’s hopes) for revival of the tourist trade ruined by the uprising of 1994, we “Zapatistas” came to cheer on thousands of Mexicans as they met during the rainy season in the soaked, tiny and impoverished indigenous settlements in the Lacandon jungle.

The Aguascalientes, as all such Zapatista meetings are now called, were staged in unknown places like Oventic, La Realidad, La Garrucha, Roberto Barrios: minuscule villages with the huge tasks of unraveling political issues, economic injustices, cultural destruction, social issues, indigenous issues, human rights and women’s issues.

It took the government a week or so after the influx to figure

out that the economic benefits of handcrafted Marcos and Ramona dolls, or the ubiquitous hawking of woven bracelets, or even the Chiclets peddled by small boys on the streets at all hours of the day and night, did not herald the return of tourist buses discharging eager purchasers in the markets and shops of San Cristóbal.

Nor was it politically what the government had bargained for: international awareness that the Mexican PRI, the world's longest-dominant governing political party, was in deep trouble along with the Mexican economy.

In a state already over-run with federal military and circled with blockades, the government's response was harassment and eviction of foreign Encuentro participants, an act of folly which won the PRI another black eye. The post-history of the Encuentro, and the struggle for human and economic rights among the population of Mexico, is being written now, from day to day.

The greater question is, must all things great and small (human beings, surfboards, language, monotheism, the wheel, chewing gum, the cosmos) have a single origin, or may spontaneous and simultaneous well-springs erupt in many places? I am speaking here now not of rebellion against oppression, the capacity for which is rediscovered in every generation. No, I'm thinking rather specifically about the contemporary worldwide grassroots brushfires against neoliberalism. And even more specifically, the dignified demand that not every person, even within a single nation, need follow the same path, nor every community the same customs. The answer to the question is evident. My admiration for the Zapatistas one small community among millions on earth, is boundless.

After a six-week stay in Chiapas headquartered at the language school, George and I flew up to Mexico City, and then back down to Oaxaca. The contrast, state to state, between glorious mountains shrouded in cloud, butterfly ecstasies, trumpets

of brash flowers, is negligible. The contrast between economic conditions in the two states is negligible. The contrast between what the pueblos are doing, the stances they have taken and the struggle they waged, was enormous.

Chiapas was devastated colonialism, racism, and the policies of the Mexican government. Oaxaca, equally ravaged, nevertheless held to a tiny but brilliant display of what must be saved and built upon: communitarian pueblos guarding their autonomy and their resources. Chiapas, distorted by the military weight of the government, was led, at the time of the uprising, only by a chimerical vision of dignity and self-sustenance that depended for its survival on the entire nation repudiating forever the PRI style of government. Oaxaca, through the combined intelligence of its educated young and its revered “uses and customs”, had been modeling the living vision for a long time, in the safety of remote villages, high in the Sierra Juarez mountains. This is not to obscure the fact that yes, small guerrilla outbreaks occur in Oaxaca, as in neighboring Guerrero. Nor to obscure the desperate economics of these tiny pueblos where half the male population emigrates illegally to the USA to find employment. But their armed rebellions are small, their vociferous complaints many.

There are thirty-one Mexican states. Most Americans (us) scarcely know what is going on south of our southern border: perhaps wetback deaths, beaches at Acapulco or Cozumel. Students of Spanish know Cuernavaca. If you’re a union member you might know about the maquiladoras (factories) along the border, cheap labor, horrible work conditions and pollution. If you’re an archeologist you might know about the Mayan ruins: pyramids and cities. Maybe you know about cheaper prescrip-

tion drugs to be purchased over the border; or maybe you like Tex-Mex food or music.

Like most Americans we knew next to nothing about Mexican politics, Mexican life conditions. As grassroots activists, we followed with more or less fervor the uprising in the state of Chiapas on New Year's Day, 1994. We made several short visits, and finally decided to live in Oaxaca for a prolonged period starting in September, 1999. On July 11 of the year 2000, the Mexican electorate turned out of office the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the PRI, which ruled Mexico for 72 years.

The following narrative, *What I Saw At the Revolution*, is my personal recounting of events in Mexico from 1996, thirty months after the January 1, 1994 uprising, through the inauguration of Vicente Fox, of the PAN, as president on December 1, 2000, to the appearance of Zapatista commanders in the Congress of Mexico.

Many observers believe that when the Zapatistas fired their shot heard round the world they outlined the dimensions of the current struggle to confront neoliberalism, and triggered a world-wide revolution of localism versus globalism — or at least its recognition. Certainly they have been acclaimed (even in a Rand Corp study done for the US government) as the pioneers of internet warfare.

Chiapas can still be regarded as a semi-feudal area, an oligarchy straddling poverty and oppression for many centuries, and so reflective of the life situation of the majority of the world's population. The Chiapas uprising remains relevant to issues of how local development will unfold in confrontation with the pressures of global corporatism. It was their action that propelled Mexican Civil Society toward the Mexican electoral Revolution of 2000. The election was as clean as one could hope for; that is, it didn't feature the normal murders, the shutting out of people

from the polls, overt bribery or ballot box stuffing. (All this occurred in the state election in Tabasco in October of 2000, and continues in local elections in Oaxaca and Guerrero.)

However, this has not been a peaceful revolution. The state of Chiapas remained under military occupation until March of 2001, and the government military, supplemented by free-lancers financed by wealthy landowners, kept up relentless pressure against the Indian communities who said *¡Ya Basta!* (Enough already!) and marched to war with their few guns and wooden rifles. A first sign of hope was the arrest of eleven so-called White Guards on October 28, 2000 for their alleged role in the massacre at Acteal in 1998.

Documentation is widely available for major events, although it's worthwhile to note that corporate American news, like The New York Times, ABC and NBC have little to offer, and that, not always accurate. The Mexican government-controlled television was even worse. However, for Spanish readers the mainstream Mexican newspapers like *La Jornada* and magazines like *Proceso* have done well. Around the world there was alternative news in print and on the radio from broadcasters like *Pacifica Radio*, and of course now it's all over the Internet, especially on the relatively new, and burgeoning, Indymedia sites and *Narconews*. The Zapatista-EZLN site has posted all Zapatista communications. For English speakers, news has been put out by the not-for-profits like Mexico Solidarity Network and Grassroots International, and in Mexico, *Enlace Civil* and the innumerable Human Rights organizations that sprang up virtually overnight since 1994.

I have tried to report as accurately as I could events I personally witnessed or information that affected me directly. The most casual reader will recognize my biases: pro-Zapatista, anti-corporate and anti-élite. I have interpolated public information

as corroboration and background to my own narrative. Here's what I saw at the revolution.

—Nancy Davies

Oaxaca, Oax., October 26, 2002

NOTES

1. EZLN, Ejército Zapatista Liberación Nacional, named in honor of one of Mexico's heroic revolutionaries, Emiliano Zapata.
2. selva, jungle
3. ESL, English as a second language
4. FZLN, Frente Zapatista Liberación Nacionál, the political arm of the Zapatista army.
5. ESOL, English for Speakers of Other Languages
6. EZLN, Zapatista National Liberation Army
7. The Aguascalientes de Guadalupe Tepeyac, the site in July and August of 1994 of the first Zapatista convocation, was destroyed by the Mexican army in February of 1995. The population fled to the selva. Built in 28 days by indigenous participants, the facilities included an auditorium to seat 10,000, a presidium for 100, a library, a computer room, kitchens, sleeping facilities, etc. The construction of Aguascalientes de Guadalupe Tepeyac was recorded on a moving documentary film.
8. Tourism is Mexico's second-largest earner of foreign exchange, the first being oil.
9. The PRI is the Institutional Revolutionary Party, Partido Revolucionario Institucionál, which has ruled continuously since 1930, achieving one of language's best examples of the term oxymoron.
10. Pueblo means town or people, depending on the context, not always easy to distinguish, and indistinguishable in Oaxaca.
11. PAN is the Partido Acción Nacional.
12. December 1, 2000. The following week, December 6, saw the inauguration of a new governor of Chiapas, Pablo Salazar, who had abandoned the PRI for an independent stance.

