

Chapter 20

Insurgency in the Age of the Internet

The Case of the Zapatistas

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The Zapatista uprising began in January 1994, as use of the internet started to spread in Mexico. Mexico was still ruled by the often authoritarian Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and the media was far from free. The first communiqué from the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) placed the movement solidly within a Latin American tradition of guerrilla organizations. Numerous Mexican guerrillas had been formed after the brutal repression of student demonstrations in 1968. In 1994, the Zapatistas demanded land for landless peasants and called for a national revolution to roll back liberal economic reforms and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). But nowhere in the first communiqué was any reference to indigenous rights to be found. Nevertheless, journalists and solidarity activists travelling to Chiapas in hordes found a movement different from that of other Latin American guerrillas; they saw, first and foremost, a conflict between oppressed indigenous peoples, fighting for dignity and cultural and political autonomy, and a brutal regime. Reports were sent back home and a version of the movement was constructed that underlined identity politics and the multicultural dimensions of the conflict.

A number of studies have concluded that the Zapatistas' clever use of the internet and other new communication technologies played an important role in breaking the regime's authoritarian grip on the media. Some, therefore, called the Zapatistas the world's first postmodern guerrilla movement. Others saw it as the introduction of a new time or a new society

(Burbach 1994; Castells 1996; Castells and Ince 2003; Cleaver 1998; Cleaver1998b). Still others have studied how activists used the internet to support the Zapatistas (Krøvel 2006; Olesen 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b).

In Subcomandante Marcos, the military commander of the Zapatistas, Manuel Castells saw a kind of “prophet,” perfectly suited to form the way we think in the age of the “network society” (Castells 1997). The think tank RAND Corporation warned that a swarm of millions of flies could overrun even the strongest government (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001: 190). While many have underlined the importance of the internet and “information warfare,” others have noted that such claims are overstating the case. The term “postmodern” is not suited to describe an organization consisting largely of poor indigenous peasants. The danger is “romanticizing” the Zapatistas, according to Berger—seeing what one wants to see in the uprising of indigenous peasants, rather than the reality of Chiapas (M. T. Berger 2001).

This chapter tracks meetings between the Zapatistas and prominent supporters. It deals with the “information strategy” of the Zapatistas and asks how it can be understood in relation to the experience of other Latin American guerrilla organizations. Did the Zapatistas have an “information strategy”? What role did visiting intellectuals play in the media framing of the Zapatistas and the conflict in Chiapas? The chapter focuses on the solidarity movement and media sympathetic toward the Zapatistas and the solidarity movement.

<HDA>Methodology</HDA>

This chapter is partly based on investigations undertaken for my PhD dissertation in history on guerrilla organizations and indigenous movements in Mexico and Central America (Krøvel 2006). I have interviewed current and former leaders of guerrillas in Colombia, Nicaragua,

Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, and other countries, in addition to civilian leaders, “ordinary” citizens, refugees, and members of numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The interviews include a large number of Zapatistas, both civilians and armed members. I have also interviewed leading members of La Neta, the organization that provided internet services in San Cristobal de las Casas, and members and leaders of NGOs in Chiapas who have been working closely with the Zapatistas, often helping them to disseminate information.

The investigation of written sources for this chapter followed two steps. First, a large number of texts from diverse sources were consulted. These include all EZLN communiqués since 1993. Since 2005, the Zapatistas themselves have run a webpage at www.ezln.org.mx, and this was also studied. The body of texts also includes reports from solidarity organizations, such as the Irish Mexico Group and the online newslister Chiapas-L. In addition, homepages of NGOs cooperating with the Zapatistas were studied. The NGOs include the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Center for Human Rights, Enlace, Centro de Análisis Político e Investigaciones Sociales y Económicas A.C., and Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria. The list of newspapers and magazines included in the study include *La Jornada* (Mexico), *Cuarto Poder* (Chiapas Mexico), *Newsweek* (USA), *Time* (USA), *Radio Havana* (Cuba), *Reuters* (UK), *Associated Press* (USA), and others. All relevant texts from two periods on the Zapatistas and the conflict were studied. The first period runs from February to March 1995, and covers a last military offensive by the Mexican army against the Zapatistas. The second period begins in February 2001 and ends in April of the same year. This period encompasses events related to a Zapatista caravan from Chiapas to Mexico City and a debate in the Mexican Congress on a proposed peace agreement with the Zapatistas. A full list of all sources can be found in my dissertation (Krøvel 2006).

Second, based on the study of the larger body of texts presented above, I assembled a selection of particularly interesting reports from Chiapas for closer qualitative study. These texts were selected because they were deemed to be particularly influential in view of their authors or the publication, but also because they were included in an anthology on the Zapatistas, thereby forming part of something reminiscent of a canon on the Zapatistas (Hayden 2002). Numerous other texts could also have been included, but these stand out, in my view, because they all stimulated intense discussion on webpages, lists, and elsewhere where activists in the global solidarity movement communicated with each other. These texts were all published in newspapers or magazines with a much wider audience than most reports from Chiapas. They are not seen here as separate from the media discourse on the Zapatistas and the conflict in Chiapas, but as particularly influential articulations of the various and sometimes conflicting media frames available for the conflict.

The texts, in chronological order, are: Paco Ignacio Taibo II, “Zapatistas! The Phoenix Rises,” *Nation*, 28 March 1994; Octavio Paz, “The Media Spectacle Comes to Mexico,” *New Perspectives Quarterly*, volume 59 (Spring 1994); Régis Debray, “Talking to the Zapatistas,” *New Left Review*, July/August 1996; Eduardo Galeano, “Chiapas Chronicle,” *La Jornada*, 7 August 1996; John Berger, “Against the Great Defeat of the World,” *Race and Class*, October 1998–March 1999; Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *Marcos: El Señor de los Espejos* (Madrid, 1999); José Saramago, “Moral Force versus the State: Chiapas, Land of Hope and Sorrow,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, English version, March 1999; Naomi Klein, “The Unknown Icon,” *Guardian*, 3 March 2001; Carlos Monsiváis, “El indígena visible (movimiento por los derechos civiles de pueblos indígenas en México),” *El Proceso*, 4 March 2001; Saul Landau, “The Zapatista Army of National Liberation: Part of the Latin American Tradition—But Also Very

Different,” *The Zapatista Reader*, edited by Tom Hayden (New York, 2002); and Gabriel García Márquez, “Habla Marcos,” *Cambio*, 24 March 2001. The texts will be read and analyzed from a constructivist perspective in relation to the way they deal with the terms “revolution,” “guerrilla,” and “indigenous peoples.”

<HDA>The Historical Context</HDA>

The EZLN has many roots, but arguably one of the most important takes us back to Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Fidel Castro, and the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Castro’s was by no means the first Latin American guerrilla organization, but what surprised many, including the Cuban leadership, was the speed with which the regime fell apart. It took only three years from the time Castro, Guevara, and a few guerrilleros landed on the Cuban shores until the final victory. This inspired Guevara to formulate a theory on revolution in Latin America (Guevara 1972, 1997; Guevara and Deutschmann 2003). Where Marxist-Leninists saw the Communist Party as the organizing force of the revolution, Guevara reserved that role for the guerrilla organization. A small group of dedicated men and women (the *foco*) could make the situation ripe for revolution by military means. This was due to what Guevara saw as a special situation in Latin America, where many countries were run by authoritarian and often isolated regimes or dictators, ripe for social revolt. By attacking the regime and resisting repression, the *foco* would prove that the regime was not invincible, according to Guevara, thereby unleashing the full potential of the farmers, workers, and other revolutionary forces.

The first wave of Cuba-inspired guerrillas that hit Latin America in the 1960s, culminating with the capture and subsequent killing of Guevara in Bolivia in 1967, did not succeed in defeating governments anywhere. Only in a few countries did the guerrillas evade

total annihilation, making reorganization possible. A second wave of guerrillas in the late 1970s and early 1980s scored some notable successes, including the victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the strength of the Farabundo Marti para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador and other places. Guerrillas and regime agreed on peace agreements, including democratization in Guatemala (1996) and El Salvador (1991), while several smaller armed organizations in Colombia agreed to disarm without initially making much of a difference to the escalating civil war.

The ideologies of the various armed organizations in Latin America developed notably over the years, but most continued to see disseminating information as an integral part of the armed struggle. Only by publicizing their perceived victories could they hope to stimulate the resistance to the regime they sought. Castro and Guevara thus had several journalists reporting from Sierra Maestra during their Cuban campaign, while the Sandinistas (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) in Nicaragua and the FMLN in the late 1970s and 1980s used international media to resist or limit US meddling in the civil wars. Central American guerrillas effectively provided information to Europe and North America in the 1980s, successfully collecting large sums of money from supporters overseas. In the El Salvadorian case, at least 80 percent of FMLN's funding came from Europe or North America (Kruijt 2008: 85).

Latin American guerrillas succeeded in building international alliances and establishing networks in North America and Europe. Renowned writers like Harold Pinter and Noam Chomsky became vocal supporters of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, while the punk band The Clash released a triple LP in 1980 called "Sandinistas" and several Hollywood productions constructed versions of the conflicts in Central America that were not unsympathetic to the guerrillas—most notably *Under Fire* (1983), with Nick Nolte, Gene Hackman, and Ed

Harris in leading roles. A number of NGOs also supported the armed opposition in their struggle to overthrow Latin American regimes; in Norway the Sandinistas found support in what became Latin-Amerikagruppene i Norge and Studentene og Akademikernes Internasjonale Hjelpfond, among others.

Less well-known is the guerrilla organizations' own capacity for producing and disseminating information. The FMLN, for instance, ran a network of radio stations from their rural strongholds; the documentary *Las mil y una historias de Radio Venceremos* later became a national best seller (Lopez Vigil 1991). Elsewhere, the guerrillas used radio and print media to spread their version of the conflicts—often successfully, because of the many excellent writers and orators in the guerrilla groups. The Sandinistas had *guerrillero* and prizewinning novelist Omar Cabezas and priest Ernesto Cardenal to tell stories of the revolution (Cabezas 1986; Cardenal 1976, 1980, 1982). In El Salvador, no one could express the feelings of the guerrillas like the poet Roque Dalton (Castillo 1975; Dalton 1969, 1970, 2002, 2004). Dalton was executed by his fellow *guerrilleros* in 1975 after what turned out to be false accusations of trying to divide the guerrilla organization. In Guatemala, Mario Payeras published the horrible but wonderfully written story of the failed urban uprising (Payeras 1987, 1989). At risk of becoming one more victim of the internal violence of the guerrilla organizations, Payeras finally left the guerrilla for fear of being executed (Castañeda 1994). In Gaspar Ilom, the Guatemalan Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) tried to create a real version of the Latin American poetic “magical realism.” Gaspar Ilom was the nom de guerre of one of the commanders of the URNG. His real name was Rodrigo Asturias Amado, the first-born son of Nobel Prize-winning author Miguel Ángel Asturias. He chose Gaspar Ilom from a character in *Hombres de maíz*, one of his father's novels (Asturias 1972). (It is probably not necessary to say

that Gaspar Ilom knew how to handle the media.)

This short background note about Latin American guerrillas, writing, and the media is not meant to be exhaustive—Brazilian, Colombian, Argentinean, Uruguayan, and other cases could have also been mentioned. But here I want to stress only the fact that Latin American guerrillas valued information or propaganda for many reasons, including reasons of ideology. The very idea of the *foco* rested on the guerrilla being able to awake the masses through information or propaganda.

<HDA>The Internet and Guerrillas in Chiapas</HDA>

The Zapatistas attacked spectacularly on 1 January 1994, but it did not take long before the army had forced the rebels to go on the run, so the EZLN retreated deep into the jungle and up into the mountains.

The Mexican regime tried to control the information seeping out from the war zone, but soon realized that this was not possible. Information kept coming from the jungle, distributed on the internet, which had only recently been introduced in Chiapas. Global networks of organizations and activists began arranging activities supporting the EZLN, using newlists and, later, homepages to mobilize support. A number of studies have highlighted the importance of the internet and information for an understanding of the development of the war in Chiapas. The Zapatistas have been seen by some as the world's first postmodern guerrilla, and by others as heralding a new time or a new society (Burbach 1994; Castells 1996; Castells and Ince 2003; Cleaver 1998; Cleaver 1998b). Nobel laureate Octavio Paz lamented the fact that political disagreement now seemed to be decided by feelings, not arguments (Paz 1994). Others have studied the way in which activists used the internet to support the Zapatistas (Olesen 2004a,

2005a). Many of these studies point to the fact that the audience now had many alternatives to traditional journalism, sometimes, as with the Zapatistas, even the opportunity to communicate directly with the sources of information. This could potentially be a serious challenge for journalism. These perceived changes were to a large extent seen to have their roots in technological developments, especially new communications technology. The underlying assumption in many cases was a development toward a society where the media and journalists, or in the words of Octavio Paz, “the Media Spectacle,” play an increasingly dominant role, so that appealing to feelings becomes more important than reasoning.

I have elsewhere underlined the real and important effects of the new communications technology for the conflict in Chiapas (Krøvel 2006). In particular, the introduction of the internet to Chiapas in 1993 enabled activists and NGOs to out-manuever the Mexican system of official and nonofficial control over the media, according to some of the activists. But a closer look at the empirical evidence shows that this had little to do with the Zapatistas having a strategy for information warfare (Ronfeldt and Fuller 1998) or being a postmodern guerrilla organization (Burbach 1994).

The first attack of the Zapatistas was, of course, a formidable media event, but was in itself more of a continuation of Latin American guerrilla strategy than something new. It was reminiscent of Comandante Zero’s spectacular attack on the parliament in Managua, Nicaragua, and the Colombian M-19’s siege of the high court in Bogota. The first declaration from the EZLN, in fact, placed the organization firmly within the framework of Cuban-inspired guerrilla movements. It talked of peasants, workers, revolution, and social justice, but did not mention indigenous peoples and their collective rights, as later declarations did. In fact, there was little evidence of a media strategy; on the contrary, as the EZLN’s military leader, Subcomandante

Marcos, explained to me and other journalists a few months later, the Zapatistas were actually surprised to survive the first days of fighting. With good reason: the second *subcomandante* was killed only a few hours after the fighting began. It is reasonable to assume that many more would have perished had the Mexican government not ordered the army, after only twelve days, not to push further into the Lacandon jungle.

Still, the Zapatistas, and especially Subcomandante Marcos, had the intelligence and willingness to improvise when the occasion demanded it. Over the next twelve months, the Zapatistas received, and handled with great skill, hordes of journalists travelling to Chiapas from every corner of the world. By accident, the Zapatistas had reached out to people of almost all nations. As information warriors, though, they could hardly measure up to other guerrilla organizations of that period, as far as I can judge from my experience as a journalist. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, for instance, had professional “war correspondents” covering their every move, and presented us with videos and photos from the front line when we (photographer Håvard Houen and I) visited them the following year. Kurdish groups connected to the Partîya Karkeren Kurdîstan (PKK) operated a TV station transmitting via satellite to exiled Kurds all over the world. And in El Salvador hundreds of thousands had tuned in every night to listen to the FMLN’s radio stations. The EZLN had some equipment in their training camps, as it turned out. In a mountainous area called Corralchen, the Mexican army found a television and video player in an abandoned camp, probably used by the EZLN for educational purposes. Rumors had it that Subcomandante Marcos wrote his poetic essays on a laptop and, as it turned out to be at least half-true, this also fuelled the mythology of the “net war.” Again, the truth behind the rumors was rather more modest. The first activists providing internet services in Chiapas, La Neta, later told how they had to ask Subcomandante Marcos

again and again to send the essay on a disc. For a long time, though, he continued to send only print on paper, making the activists in La Neta type the whole thing into their computers (Krøvel 2004).

<HDA>Framing the Zapatistas in the Global Solidarity Movement</HDA>

Nevertheless, the Zapatistas undoubtedly hit a nerve with a global audience. Thousands of activists travelled to Chiapas to support them, often sending home reports on the internet or published in newspapers. This process reveals a lot about what was really new in the conflict in Chiapas.

Many of those visiting the Zapatistas were famous writers and able to reach a wide audience. In my view, these authors played an important role in constructing a specific understanding of the conflict in Chiapas, an understanding that, over the years, has restricted the Mexican government's range of options for repression or military action in Chiapas. They were also important in defining the media discourse on the conflict and the Zapatistas, especially in the media sympathetic toward the Zapatistas and the global solidarity movement. I will, therefore, use examples from these writers to describe the dominating frames among solidarity activists in the following.

<HDB>Frame 1: *The Democratic Indigenous Society*</HDB>

The stories told by Taibo, Saramago, and Klein all deal with poverty, repression, and the fight for justice (Klein 2001; Saramago 1999; Taibo II 1994). The combination of racism and poverty is the real reason for the conflict, according to these writers. But Saramago, Klein, García Márquez, Mosiváis, and Vázquez Montalbán (García Márquez 2001; Monsiváis 2001; Vázquez Montalbán 1999) ask for more before accepting the armed rebellion. A justified rebellion must

also present a viable alternative to existing injustice, and they want an alternative project of rebellion, based on democratic participation. In these stories the arguments of democracy and participation are linked to an image of indigenous societies and indigenous politics: democratic participation means something deeper and more meaningful in these societies than in Western society, according to the authors.

<HDB>Frame 2: Different from other Revolutionary Movements</HDB>

Many of the articles go on to compare the EZLN with other Latin American guerrilla organizations trying to encourage indigenous peoples to rebel. Debray is particularly interesting because he had such a profound effect on the revolutionary Left in Latin America and Europe after he published his accounts of the Cuban Revolution (Debray 1967, 1973). He also joined Che Guevara's fatal insurgency in Bolivia, but survived. His article was initially printed in *Le Monde* in 1996, and later reprinted elsewhere (Debray 1996). Much of the article tells the story of his meeting with Subcomandante Marcos in the village of La Realidad. Debray constructs an image of a romantic revolutionary "Indian"—his indigenous peoples are oppressed, but proud, free, and democratic by nature. The EZLN is said to be built on the Indian communities' nature, where power flows "from below." The Zapatistas are therefore the opposite of, and the perfect antidote to, the Shining Path of Peru.

Debray's article is in many ways typical of the reporting from Chiapas. It is a story of disillusion; not disillusion because of the fall of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, but disillusion with the revolutionary movements of Latin America. Guerrilla organizations like Shining Path and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) were isolated, were loathed by workers and intellectuals, depended on criminal activity to survive, and were responsible for massive violations of human rights. The EZLN is presented as an alternative,

which demonstrates the possibility of being revolutionary while not supporting authoritarian movements.

<HDB>Frame 3: Indigenous and Revolutionary</HDB>

The selected articles also construct the Zapatistas as a movement in contrast to other indigenous movements in Latin America, as clearly seen in the article by Eduardo Galeano (Galeano 1996). Galeano received instant fame when he published *The Open Veins of Latin America* (Galeano 1973). He did not see himself as a neutral observer, but felt part of a community of activists and Zapatistas. The EZLN has many dimensions in Galeano's story, but the identity as indigenous is particularly important. The imagined community of the indigenous peoples is born from "500 years" of cruelty. This oppression of indigenous peoples justifies the armed insurgency in Galeano's account. While both Galeano and Debray see a democratic political practice as a natural part of indigenous tradition in Chiapas, Naomi Klein and Saul Landau develop this argument further, using Zapatista slogans to build an argument for antiauthoritarian revolutionary movements.

These articles present an organization, the EZLN, which is indigenous, in contrast to those Latin American guerrilla organizations that claimed to fight on behalf of indigenous peoples, and failed miserably in most cases. According to these articles, it was the identity as indigenous that transformed the Zapatistas into a democratic movement, which underlines the difference between the EZLN and other Latin American guerrilla organizations.

<HDB>Frame 4: Against Authoritarian Modernization</HDB>

All these authors seem to support the EZLN for at least three reasons: because it is revolutionary, but still democratic, and because it is indigenous. John Berger brings these three together elegantly to form a new and surprising argument against neoliberalism (J. Berger 2006): free

trade and the free markets may have celebrated victories all over the world, but if the supposedly rational competition to maximize profits wins everywhere, the world will become poorer. Neoliberalism must be fought because it has become such a success. José Saramago, Carlos Monsiváis, and John Holloway also follow this line of thought (Holloway and Peláez 1998; Holloway 2005; Monsiváis Aceves, 2001). The Zapatistas are fighting for the right to be different from the rational profit-maximizing ideal. Which is a fight for us all, according to the authors.

These media frames are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Many reports from Chiapas display elements from several of these media frames. This is to be expected, since the dominating frames all revolve around a few related key issues, like *revolution*, *democracy*, and imaginations of indigenous identities. As we have already seen, the Zapatistas themselves did not refer to any indigenous identity when they first entered the stage in 1994. They presented themselves as peasants, revolutionaries, and Mexicans. The outsiders seem to have seen something else: they saw indigenous peoples, not peasants. Nonetheless, being indigenous increasingly became more important when the Zapatistas communicated with the outside world. Thus, being *seen* and *framed* by outsiders was one of the causes that set in motion a process of reconstruction of local identity and understandings of “community.”

<HDA>The Public Sphere of the Movement</HDA>

In contrast to the hype of a “postmodern” movement engaged in “information warfare,” the reality of Chiapas was somewhat different. The public sphere of the indigenous communities that joined the EZLN was characterized by oral tradition and oral communication. Almost all communication on issues of interest between members of a community or between communities

was made orally, preferably in meetings where the relevant members of the communities could have face-to-face dialogues. Very little was and still is *mediated*.

The Zapatistas draw support from indigenous communities where illiteracy has been a serious problem for generations. This is particularly true for the many settlements in the Lacandon jungle, which formed the backbone of the EZLN in the early years. In many of these settlements, more than 70 percent of the population was illiterate. This should not be taken as an indication of a weak public sphere. On the contrary, anthropological studies have shown a rich and lively public debate in a variety of arenas in these villages. The indigenous communities are typically organized according to local understandings of “tradition” in a complex web of committees and delegations, each responsible for specific tasks in the social and political life of the community. All adults are expected to participate, and positions in committees and delegations are supposed to rotate between the members of the community. One study found that more than half of the adult population at any given time would serve in a committee or a commission (Leyva Solano and Ascencio Franco 1996). Decision making is based on consensus. The emphasis on oral communication and consensus has led some analysts to use the term “premodern” to describe the political organization (Nugent 1995).

After 1994, the EZLN continued to emphasize dialogue in face-to-face settings both on a regional, national, and global scale. This was particularly evident in 2001 and 2006, as the Zapatistas sent delegations to all corners of Mexico to dialogue with interested groups. Nonetheless, more recent developments hint at increasing Zapatista interest in other forms of communication. First, the Zapatista launched Radio Insurgente in 2002, communicating first directly with base communities in Chiapas, and later with solidarity activists globally through their webpage. The webpage www.ezln.org was originally run by activists from the global

solidarity movement, but from 2006 came directly under control of the Zapatistas themselves, and is now found at www.ezln.org.mx. Here new spaces of communication have opened up as activists globally use forums to communicate directly with Major Moises and Subcomandante Marcos.

<HDA>Conclusion</HDA>

It is not my intention here to say that the Zapatistas are not indigenous, democratic, or revolutionary, or that the authors of the articles discussed earlier were wrong. The Zapatistas were indeed indigenous, or to be more precise, they were Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolobal, Chol, and more. Some even wore traditional costumes. All had experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity. But what unified the Zapatistas in one organization was their common interests as peasants and Mexicans, and this is why the first declaration talks of land for the landless and of revolution in Mexico. It was from the outside that they were seen as indigenous peoples. And maybe they needed to be seen as indigenous from the outside to discover the many similarities between their own experiences and those of the Aymaras of Bolivia, Miskitos of Nicaragua, and Sami of Norway. There are also several reasons to support the claim that the Zapatistas were more democratic than other revolutionary movements. The very decision to go to war, for instance, was made at a conference somewhere in Lacandon a year before the war actually began. It seems to have been made after a long debate followed by a popular vote among the representatives of hundreds of villages (Tello Diaz 2001). Many Cuban-inspired urban members of the organization left the EZLN in protest after a majority of indigenous peasants won the vote. As far as I know, this is the only time a Latin American guerrilla organization, at least in modern times, has taken a more or less popular vote on whether or not to go to war. This model of

governing seems deeply rooted in the isolated communities of the Lacandon, where consensus on all important issues is highly valued as an ideal.

So, does this support the far-reaching claims of Castells, Cleaver, and others? According to Castells, information has become the most important resource in the “network society”: “hierarchical and rigid forms of organization” will in the future be no match for flexible networks organized around symbols of identity. Castells felt that a few “prophets,” like Subcomandante Marcos, were the protagonists in this process (1997). Harry M. Cleaver said: “Today those networks are providing the nerve system of increasingly global challenges to the dominant economic policies of this period” (Cleaver 1998a: 621). The “fabric of politics . . . is being rewoven” and is challenging the “existing political, social and economic order” (Cleaver 1998a: 637).

In my view, there is little evidence to suggest that the Zapatistas had any information strategy, except for the fact that the war itself was supposed to attract attention to their cause, just like it had previously elsewhere in Central America. There is even less evidence to support the claim that the Zapatistas exploited the internet to wage war against the Mexican government, as it took at least ten years from when the war broke out until the Zapatistas themselves began to connect to the internet. Such claims are exaggerated. In reality, the Zapatistas had been planning for a different war, a war for times long gone. They were inspired by the Cuban Revolution, but met a Mexico that was very different from Cuba in the late 1950s. In Mexico and elsewhere, there were thousands of activists ready to exploit the internet in support of the Zapatistas, making them icons of the “age of the networks.”

Fifteen years after the rebellion in Chiapas, it is worthwhile to reflect on the results. Indigenous groups in a number of countries, for instance, Brazil, Panama, Colombia, and

Nicaragua, have won far-reaching collective rights to territories and the natural resources they contain. Many Latin American countries, including neighboring Guatemala, have ratified the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 169 on indigenous rights. In spite of the massive "media spectacle," the activists, the international protests, the internet, the reweaving of the "fabric of politics," and the continued poetic essays from the "prophet's" hands, Mexico has resisted calls for the full adoption of the ILO's Convention 169.

In my view, claims of "new society," "net warfare," and new forms of power were premature. The Zapatistas did not win the war because of a clever information strategy—they probably did not even have such a strategy. But what we saw was the Western media reframing or reconstructing the Zapatistas as an indigenous movement. Seen as an indigenous movement, the Zapatistas could see their struggle in a much larger context of oppressed indigenous peoples. Being indigenous was a reason for discrimination, but became something to be proud of—important in itself, but hardly a new world.

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