

## **From "indios" to "indígenas": guerrilla perspectives on indigenous peoples and repression in Mexico, Guatemala and Nicaragua**

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### **Abstract**

*Subcomandante Marcos and other Zapatistas have on numerous occasions discussed the clash between "Northern" perspectives on revolution and the world, and indigenous reality. Understanding the meaning, for the insurgency, of the indigenous culture of the Zapatista support base has also been a major topic in the writing of many supporters of, and visitors to, the Zapatistas. But such an understanding of the history of the Zapatistas has consequences for our understanding of the conflicts between guerrilla organizations and indigenous peoples in Guatemala and Nicaragua during the 80s and 90s. This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of such issues based on studies of the Zapatistas and similar encounters between guerrilleros and indigenous peoples in Nicaragua and Guatemala. A better understanding of the clash between "Northern" perspectives and indigenous realities is a necessary prerequisite for understanding why some movements fail and others succeed.*

*The relationship between armed groups and indigenous peoples had a powerful effect on the outcomes of the civil wars in the region. The root causes for the problems between indigenous peoples and guerrilla organizations are sought in, among other things, militaristic guerrilla organisations, marked by hierarchical, centralised and inflexible structures which did not facilitate the processes of learning. Learning to understand indigenous peoples and their worldviews would have been necessary to avoid the type of self-destructive behaviour that is described in this article. The experiences from Nicaragua, Guatemala and Mexico raises some important questions for future research on social movements also elsewhere: Who do the movements represent? What type of communication and learning goes on within the social movement? Are certain groups excluded from fully participating?*

### **Introduction**

Reflecting on the history of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), Subcomandante Marcos concludes a letter thus: "In reality, the only thing we proposed was to change the world; the rest we have improvised. We had our rigid concepts of the world and revolution thoroughly dented in the encounter with the indigenous reality of Chiapas" (Gilly, Subcomandante

Marcos and Ginzburg, 1995).

Much had happened between 1983, when a small group of cadres from Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (FLN) set out, inspired by the Cuban revolution and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, to organise a guerrilla movement in the Lacandon jungle of Chiapas, Mexico, and 1995, when the letter was published in a book edited by Adolfo Gilly. Gilly, a revolutionary activist and experienced researcher of Latin American revolutionary movements (Gilly, 2010), had invited Subcomandante Marcos to discuss the merits of microhistory, a tradition of studying history that focuses intensely on a small unit of research (a village, a family or a person), in order to understand the Zapatista movement and the mainly indigenous communities of the EZLN. Gilly had hinted that microhistory stresses the importance of culture and the agency of historical actors, and is therefore a potentially fruitful perspective for an understanding of the historical development of the EZLN. Subcomandante Marcos used the occasion to recount part of the movement's history, underlining how much the EZLN had changed – from a classical Cuban inspired guerrilla movement led and dominated by university educated intellectuals from outside Chiapas, to something very different: an army controlled and under the command of elected representatives from the indigenous communities.

Yet, Marcos was reluctant to give up macroperspectives related to universal understandings of liberation and oppression for the analysis of the history of the EZLN. The clash between "Northern" perspectives on revolution and the world, and indigenous reality, is a theme with which Marcos and other Zapatistas have engaged on numerous occasions, for instance in children's stories and in narratives and mythologies of the birth and development of the EZLN in the Lacandon (Marcos, 1999, 2001, 2008; Marcos and Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Mexico), 1997; Marcos and Pacheco, 2004; Marcos and Ponce de Leon, 2001). Understanding the meaning, for the insurgency, of the indigenous culture of the Zapatista support base has also been a major topic in the writing of many supporters of, and visitors to, the Zapatistas (J. Berger, 2006; M. T. Berger, 2001; H. Cleaver, J. Holloway & Pelaez E., 1998; R. Debray, 1996; Galeano, 1996; Holloway, 1998, 2005; Klein, 2001; Monsiváis Aceves, 2001; Saramago, 1999). This article, which seeks to contribute to our understanding of such issues, is based on studies of the Zapatistas and similar encounters between guerrilleros and indigenous peoples in Nicaragua and Guatemala. A better understanding of the clash between "Northern" perspectives and indigenous realities is a necessary prerequisite for an analysis of the possibilities and limitations of guerrilla movement forms of politics and of state repression against social movements and indigenous movements in the region.

As with the Zapatistas, so too the guerrillas in Guatemala and Nicaragua had to come to terms with resistance from indigenous groups and the increasing confidence of a growing indigenous movement. In Guatemala and Nicaragua, prominent former guerrilla leaders such as Daniel Ortega and Rodrigo Asturias have later apologised for human rights abuses committed against indigenous

peoples and other civilians.

The goal of this article is first to introduce to the debate sources which are new and not yet fully exploited. It analyses the writings of the guerrilleros themselves. The second intention is to contribute to a re-reading and re-interpretation of the historical circumstances that led to the relationships between guerrillas and indigenous peoples. To understand the historical development of this relationship it is first necessary to investigate the origins of the guerrilleros. Who were they, and what motivated them? This is important for an understanding of the process of ideology formation. The article will then move on to an analysis of what happened when these guerrilleros encountered the indigenous reality for which they were equipped with certain ideological frames for understanding and interpreting. This will help us understand the historical development of the difficult relationship between guerrilleros and indigenous peoples, so that it becomes possible to learn from the experience.

### **Existing literature on guerrillas and indigenous peoples**

Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* is both a participant's analysis of the Cuban guerrilla campaign and a "textbook" that inspired many Latin Americans to become guerrilleros themselves. Guevara, however, paid little attention to questions such as the study of indigenous peoples, *inter alia* because an understanding of indigenous peoples was not particularly relevant for the Cuban guerrilla (Ernesto Guevara, 1997). Guevara's most important contribution, from a military perspective, was to elevate the guerrilla from a tactic used in some military situations (according to traditional revolutionary literature), to a strategic tool. The guerrilla organisation, beginning with the *foco*, a tiny group of dedicated guerrilleros, could be a substitute for the party, taking the role of vanguard of the revolution (R. Debray, 1980).

Dozens of guerrilla organisations were formed, and took up arms, in Latin America over the next four decades. The majority of guerrilla *comandantes* were students, teachers, priests or of some other middle class profession, most of them coming from urban areas (Glockner Corte, 2008; Krøvel, 2006; Wickham-Crowley, 1993). Many of these first early armed organisations failed, with many of their leaders killed or imprisoned; amongst them Guevara himself who died in an attempt to spread the revolution to Bolivia in 1967 (J. L. Anderson, 1997; Taibo II, 1996). New groups soon emerged however, more varied in their ideologies, ranging from Cuban inspired *focoism* to Maoism, left-leaning populism to Moscow-inspired doctrinaire Marxism, from groups establishing themselves in remote inaccessible areas to the urban guerrillas of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay (Laqueur, 1977, 1998). These guerrillas sought different paths according to what they saw as a specific national context (Castañeda, 1994; Ernesto Guevara, Loveman and Davies, 1997; Kruijt, 2008)

From approximately the late 1970s, a global indigenous movement was also growing in strength, and growing more assertive in demanding rights and

autonomy (A. Brysk, 2002). Indigenous peoples increasingly made themselves heard, breaking out of the stereotypical role of victim in need of economic development and modernisation, demanding the right to participate actively in making decisions affecting their communities. Indigenous organisations in Latin America also built global alliances, in many places winning various forms of autonomy (Diaz-Polanco, 1997; Rachel Sieder, 2002; Van Cott, 1994; Warren, 1998). Scholars sought to reconcile the arguments for special rights for indigenous peoples with the principle of universal law by arguing that it was necessary to give indigenous peoples special collective rights to protect their language, religion and culture (Jovanovic, 2005; Kymlicka, 1995, 1989).

Classic Cuban-inspired guerrilla ideology paid little attention to culture in general and to that of indigenous peoples in particular. The focus was on workers and peasants, classes and class struggle. Ernesto Guevara himself did not manage to establish friendly relations with the local peasants in Bolivia. According to Debray, failure to understand the indigenous peasants was one mayor explanation for the failure of the whole Bolivian campaign.

After the revolution in Nicaragua it did not take the Sandinista government long to alienate indigenous peoples and other ethnic minorities on the Atlantic Coast, as amply demonstrated by both former Sandinista leaders, for instance Hooker Kain, and leading academics who originally travelled to Nicaragua to support the Sandinistas, as in the case of Gordon and Hale (Gordon, 1998; Hale, 1994; Hooker Kain, 2008).

The academic debate on the relationship between indigenous peoples and guerrillas came to a climax after David Stoll published his account of the situation in indigenous towns in Ixil, Guatemala. According to Stoll, the indigenous people were victims of systematic human rights abuses by both parties to the conflict (Stoll, 1993, 1999). He demonstrated how the indigenous peoples were caught between two armies, and blames the guerrillas for "misleading indigenous groups and making them targets for the army", even though he recognizes that the majority of killings were committed by the state apparatus (Reid, 2006).

After the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico in 1994, a large and growing body of literature has emerged debating the nature of the Zapatista organisation and its differences from traditional guerrilla organisation, strategy and politics (M. T. Berger, 2001; H. Cleaver, J. Holloway, and Pelaez E., 1998; Cleaver, 1998; Collier, 2005; R. Debray, 1996; Diaz-Polanco, 2002; Eber, 2003; Holloway, 1998, 2005; Ross, 2006). Others have pointed to the fact that a Cuban-inspired organisation originally established the EZLN in the Lacandon jungle in the early 1980s and doubt that a real transformation of the type described by many has taken place (Bredeveien, 2008; Estrada Saavedra, 2007).

This literature in relation to traditional guerrilla organisation, strategy and politics questioned the claim made by the guerrilla organizations of representing and struggling on behalf of a "people", suggesting that such an articulation of the "people" was a form of ontological and epistemological

reductionism. The complex reality of the region could not be reduced and understood as a struggle for the liberation of a "people", without considering the fact that the states consisted of many peoples, and that the indigenous peoples did not necessarily see themselves as belonging to this particular imagined community: *the people*. Building on this analysis, I argue the failure to understand indigenous perspectives has had serious consequences for the armed insurgencies.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

In an article on African rebel movements, Mkandawire seeks to understand the actions of the rebel movements and their violence (Mkandawire, 2002). According to Mkandawire, "we need to know, on the one hand, the nature of the rebel movements – the thinking, composition, actions and capacities of the leaders of the insurgent movements – and on the other hand, the social structures of the African countryside in which they often operate." Mkandawire concludes that the urban origins of rebel movements were part of the problem, explaining some of the "self-defeating behaviour on the part of armed groups" that caused such "terrible suffering for rural populations".

Wickham-Crowley and Loveman have proposed that a similar urban-rural divide was also present in Latin American guerrilla experiences (Loveman and Guevara, 1997; Wickham-Crowley, 1993). In the rural areas of Chiapas, Guatemala and the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, an additional divide appeared between the urban mestizo elite and indigenous peasants, as described by Marcos, Gilly and others. This was a challenge, not only because the indigenous peoples often only spoke Tojolobal, Tzeltal, Kaqchikel, K'iche', Mam, Misquito, Sumu Mayangnga or other indigenous languages (and little or no Spanish), but also because of real and deep differences in world views.

It might be helpful here to draw on the philosopher Arne Næss, whose model of deep ecology (Næss, 1966, 1973, 1999) has inspired a number of thinkers in developing concepts and philosophies dealing with problems related to pluralism. According to Næss, the richness and diversity of life-forms contribute to the realisation of the values defined in deep ecology, and are also "values in themselves" (Næss and Mysterud, 1999, p. 356). In an exchange of letters with Austrian-born philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend, both Næss and Feyerabend agreed on the importance of learning when confronted with diversity and in particular in the form of indigenous peoples and their systems of knowledge. Feyerabend criticised Western bureaucratic logic which he saw as incapable of understanding indigenous peoples and their systems of knowledge (Feyerabend, 1999). Anyone trying to meet and understand indigenous peoples, therefore, had to accept the fact that you must be able to learn and change in order to be able to understand.

The young and urban guerrilleros were faced with a reality where they had to use what they had, their existing knowledge and experience in order to learn, so

that they could understand the indigenous peoples and their world views. This required the ability to read text, using the discourse from critical literacy, in an active, reflective manner, in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships (Coffey, 2011). For the purposes of critical literacy, text is taken to include songs, novels, conversations, pictures, movies and so on. Critical literacy thus challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development (Shore, 1999). According to Brysk in a seminal work on the indigenous movement in Latin America, such learning can take place when new information combines with existing knowledge and experience to construct new histories, understandings and political identities. Yet in the cases of Guatemala and Nicaragua this process seems not to have occurred, resulting in a monologue as opposed to a dialogue between guerrillas and indigenous communities. Whereas in the case of the EZLN a dialogue does seem to have formed which was manifested in the guerrilleros learn to listening in order to achieve indigenous support for the guerrilla and the armed strategy and recognizing new actors with individual and collective agency (S. Marcos, 1994).

This perspective based on deep ecology and critical literacy will be used to analyse and evaluate the relationship between guerrillas and indigenous communities. Were the indigenous peoples seen as actors with agency? Did the guerrilleros listen to and learn from the indigenous peoples? Were the indigenous peoples consulted as equal partners on questions related to ideology, strategy and tactics of the struggle?

## **Methodology**

I draw from three categories of texts, in addition to drawing on my own interviews (oral histories) and observation. Many of the sources have not yet been used to shed light on the relationship between guerrillas and indigenous peoples. The sources will help us understand how the guerrilleros understood the concept of "people". They will also aid us in understanding what the guerrilleros were thinking about the indigenous peoples and the role the indigenous peoples were supposed to play in the insurgencies.

The first category consists of investigations, diaries and literature written by individual members of the guerrilla organisations before or during the conflicts. Many of these sources were not easily available before the civil wars ended. The second category consists of memoirs and analyses written retrospectively by guerrilleros. The third category consists of publications from the guerrilla organisations during the civil wars in the region. Much of the information published from the early 1960s onwards has been collected by El Centro de Documentación de los Movimientos Armados (CeDeMA) in Buenos Aires, greatly facilitating systematic studies of guerrilla discourse.

## **Who were the guerrillas and what motivated them?**

If one starts from the assumption that the urban background of the guerrilla leaders was a cause for later misunderstandings and lack of communication in Africa and Mexico, it is necessary to describe and reflect briefly on the background of the leadership of the Central American organisations. In 1954, a group of reactionary officers, supported by the CIA, succeeded in overthrowing the democratically elected left-leaning president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz, forcing many of his supporters into exile. One of those leaving Guatemala was a young Argentine doctor, Ernesto Guevara, who headed north to Mexico, where he later met a group of Cuban exiles. Another was a young poet from Quetzaltenango who travelled south to El Salvador where he soon joined a group of poets and artists, becoming a close friend of the young Salvadorian poet Roque Dalton.

Otto Rene Castillo became a student leader and was granted a scholarship to study in East Germany where much of his best-known poetry was written. Later, returning to Guatemala, he joined the guerrilla (Fuerzas Armadas de Guatemala), assuming responsibility for ideological training in the guerrilla. According to Roque Dalton, Castillo was the first of the guerrilleros to really understand the suffering of the indigenous peoples (Dalton, 1993). He vividly depicts the lives and tragedies of many ordinary Guatemalans, but it is harder to distil his ideology from his poems. He paints a romantic picture of life and joy under the Stalinist regime in East Germany and alludes to the successes of the North Koreans in a way that indicates a rather dogmatic and inflexible modernist worldview (Castillo, 1993, pp. 37,102).

Gaspar Ilom (real name Rodrigo Asturias) was also arrested by the army after joining the guerrilla, but survived. His influences also seem to be the coup against Arbenz and the plight of the poor of Guatemala, but with an additional twist. His father was the novelist and Nobel laureate Miguel Angel Asturias, who was known to sympathise with revolutionary groups, and who also met with representatives of the guerrilla at one stage (Macías, 1997).

Most of the early guerrilla leaders had gained some education, either at university or in the army (Wickham-Crowley, 1993). While they identified with the poor, few of them could be described as particularly poor themselves. One exception to that rule was Carlos Fonseca, founder of FSLN (Nicaragua), the son of a poor single mother from Matagalpa (Zimmermann, 2003) – but even he made it to university before becoming a guerrillero. Many spent years in the student movement before joining the guerrillas, sometimes continuing to work for the student movement while secretly remaining members of the guerrilla, as in the case of Omar Cabezas in Leon, Nicaragua. Cabezas was a student leader for six years before having to go underground (Cabezas, 1985, 1986). It is not my intention here to question the heroic efforts many of these student leaders made to overthrow the dictatorships. But it is necessary to notice that a large majority of the leading ideologues of the guerrilla organizations had to go underground when they still were young university students with little or no experience of engagement with indigenous peoples. This, of course, influenced

the way they and the organizations they built thought about the role of indigenous peoples and other ethnic minorities in the revolution.

Many were influenced and motivated by brothers and sisters joining the guerrilla. Both Omar Cabezas and comandante Santiago (Guatemala) lost three brothers or sisters (Cabezas, 1985; Santa Cruz Mendoza, 2004). The Nicaraguan guerrilleros Tellos (real name René Tejada) is another, and a particularity cruel, example. His brother, David Tejada Peralta, was thrown into the Santiago volcano and killed (Cabezas, 1985, p. 91). The FMLN had strong bonds to a broader spectrum of civil society organisations than did their counterparts elsewhere, largely because they had grown out of trade union and church organisations as a consequence of the violent repression of these sectors in the 1970s (Cienfuegos, 1986).

The young urban students who became guerrilla leaders were often radicalised because of personal experiences of repression and loss. They identified their experiences of being victims with those of the poor and often indigenous peasants, without reflecting much on the differences between themselves, belonging to a relatively privileged group, and the indigenous peasants. The backgrounds of those who went on to become leaders and ideologues of the guerrilla organisations played an important role in the development of ideology and made an impact on the later dynamic between guerrillas and indigenous peoples. Most importantly, their youth and inexperience, combined with a relatively privileged urban upbringing, provided little knowledge or experience which they could later draw on to better understand indigenous peoples and learn their world-views, as put forward by Næss, Feyerabend, Gilly, Subcomandante Marcos and others (Feyerabend, 1999; Gilly, et al., 1995; Næss, 1999).

### **Ideology formation**

The process of ideology formation is best understood as involving an affective element of a real and experienced concern for the oppressed and a particular ideological education in which studies in Moscow, Prague, Havana and elsewhere played an important role and influenced national or local narratives on liberation and struggles for freedom (T. Anderson, 1982; Blanco Moreno and Editorial, 1970; Cabezas, 1985; Ortega Saavedra, 1979; Payeras, Harnecker and Simon, 1982; Womack, 1969). Little in this ideological education prepared them for the encounters with the complex realities and the various indigenous peoples of Nicaragua, Guatemala and Mexico.

The role played by Cuba in instigating revolt in Latin America has been hotly debated in the academic literature (Castañeda, 1994). The memoirs and diaries investigated for this study clearly demonstrate the importance of Cuba and the Cuban revolutionary experience. In Nicaragua, Carlos Fonseca, Thomas Borge and the other original members of the FSLN were all inspired by the Cuban



revolution. Carlos Fonseca lived and worked in Cuba for lengthy periods of his life. Although he never personally met Ernesto Guevara, his writings undoubtedly had great impact on the initial strategy of FSLN (González Bermejo, 1979). In Cuba he met and held discussions with other guerrilla leaders of Latin America. Guerrilleros from Guatemala and El Salvador were also given a safe haven in Cuba, which continued to provide them with training, expertise and equipment for much of the period investigated here.

The Cuban contact sometimes led to further travel. Many went on to visit or study the socialist societies in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and North Vietnam (Baltodano, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Fonseca, 1964; Zimmermann, 2003).

Gustavo Porras remembers being less than impressed by the dogmatism of the Eastern European states he visited in 1967 (Porras, 2009). Traces of inspiration from these regimes and a particular hierarchical ideology are nonetheless sometimes found in the memoirs and diaries of guerrilleros in the four countries under discussion. Mario Payeras tells how the Guatemalan guerrilleros Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP, the Guerilla Army of the Poor) placed heavy emphasis on political work, always trying to "educate" new recruits and the civilians who cooperated with the guerrilla. The people had to be armed with both weapons and the right ideas, he explained (Payeras, 1989, p. 124). They were teaching no less than "the science" of "making revolution" (Payeras, 1989, p. 125). Omar Cabezas also explains how the Sandinistas worked to recruit and organise in the poor neighbourhoods of Leon. He was reading from the Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx. As he was talking and explaining, he could see them sitting there, "sucking it all in" (Cabezas, 1985, p. 53).

The ideologies that developed in this process combine a profound and deep concern for the oppressed with a modernist progressivism which brings together particular voices. Yet there seems to be very little interest in listening to the oppressed. The urban intellectual elite comes across as feeling secure in their superiority. Not listening, and assuming a didactic as opposed to dialogical teaching stance, resembles what Paolo Freire, has criticised as "left sectarianism" (Cooper and White, 2006, p. xvii). Such an authoritarian pedagogical stance, excluding particular voices from a dialogue on ideology and strategy, cuts off the organisations from a potential source of learning and development, as pointed out by Næss and Feyerabend (Feyerabend, 1999; Næss, 1999). This authoritarian pedagogical stand is in stark contrast to the Zapatista experience, as it is described and interpreted by Subcomandante Marcos and others (Gilly, et al., 1995; Marcos and Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Mexico), 1997; Marcos and Ponce de Leon, 2001).

After the initial clashes and the first repression by the government forces, the guerrilla leaders retreated to inaccessible mountains or to the jungle. Some went into exile in Cuba, others sought refuge elsewhere. In many of the memoirs, the leaders became distant figures living mystical lives in faraway places, separated from the people they wanted to free (Cabezas, 1985; Macías, 1997; Santa Cruz Mendoza, 2004). Becoming detached from the daily life of ordinary people was

a logical consequence of the guerrilla doctrine, particularly because the majority of guerrilla commanders in the 60s and early 70s emphasised the need for organising groups of guerrilleros in remote and isolated mountains.

In the remote and isolated mountains the guerrilleros had very few opportunities to interact with their supporters in the cities. They were also often cut off from their local supporters in the rural areas as the regimes organized violent counterinsurgency campaigns. These armed and often isolated groups were to take the lead in the revolutionary struggle, according to Guevara's guerrilla strategy (Guevara et al., 1997). The groups grew gradually more distant from students, trade unions, peasant organisations, radical church groups and so on. The EZLN developed very differently from these organisations, but not because it was very different in ideology from the other organisations. On the contrary, there are many similarities in ideology and strategy between early EZLN and the other armed organisations. However, in contrast to the Central American organisations, the EZLN had decided not to finance military training and operations by committing robberies and kidnappings. In addition, the EZLN did not seek external support; instead it became dependent, for food and supplies, on the communities it sought to liberate. All of this had important consequences for the relationship, which will be discussed in greater depth below, between the urban elite and the indigenous majority in the organisation.

As the first wave of guerrilla insurgencies ebbed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new breed of guerrilla organisation emerged – more diverse, and seeking inspiration from various intellectual sources. Some remained true to the original guerrilla strategy of Guevara (Moran, 1982) while others sought inspiration in the Chinese revolution and prepared for a very long war. Some called for the mobilisation of trade unions and civil society in order to organise general strikes. And others believed that only urban insurrection could lead to the downfall of the regimes (Baltodano, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Kruijt, 2008).

### **Ideology versus reality**

Che Guevara talked a lot about the creation of "a new man" (Debray and Guevara, 1975; Guevara, 1972; Reyes Rodríguez, Pombo, and Braulio, 1979; Rolando, Pombo, and Braulio, 1979), someone completely dedicated to the struggle, hardened and experienced after years of fighting with the guerrilla. But the reality of the guerrilleros was often very different from the ideal. The guerrilleros were surrounded by enemies, constantly in fear of being attacked or ambushed, always nervous of being seen by informers, captured, tortured or killed. Many suffered under the psychological pressure. Omar Cabezas tells of Tellos (René Tejada), whom he met when he first joined the guerrilla. Tellos was obviously deeply depressed, and sometimes broke down in tears when the new guerrilleros did not respond positively to the training he gave them (Cabezas, 1985). He was overwhelmed with rage and disappointment. Tellos was subsequently killed in an ambush. Payeras also tells a similar story. One of the

original members of EGP, Minche, became so depressed and negative that the others felt he was compromising the survival of the whole group. Most of all, they feared that Minche would run off and be caught by the security forces, telling them everything he knew about the guerrilla and its contacts in the villages (Payeras, 1989, p. 56). The small group of guerrilleros took Minche outside the camp and executed him; all the while Minche was trying to convince his comrades of his dedication to the revolution.

These examples illustrate that it is not sufficient here to discuss ideology formation alone – it is also necessary to say how the guerrilleros coped with stress and how they managed affect. The actual interaction between the guerrilleros and indigenous peoples were not only a result of ideology, but must also be understood in relation to the very dangerous and life threatening situations the guerrilleros faced every day. The communication with indigenous peoples depended on knowledge and insight in order to build relations that facilitated trust. While a failure to build trust resulted in mutual suspicion and a downward spiral of mistrust and animosity. The emotional stress and psychological pressure were often made worse by the feeling of loneliness. Many felt homesick. Others found it difficult to connect with the local peasants, at least in the beginning. Cabezas reflected on the difference between himself and the local peasants: "We, from the cities, are more complex, more abstract, more sophisticated, more complicated, regarding both emotions and emotional stress, the way we interpret things," he wrote. (Cabezas, 1985) [my translation]. For the young urban students, the local peasants were "the other", imagined in relationship to their difference from "us". The "other" could walk for hours, knew the mountain or the forests, needed very little food and water and kept quiet for most of the time.

The abyss between the guerrilleros and the indigenous peasants in Mexico, Guatemala and the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua seems to have been even bigger. In the 1960s, a group of Guatemalan guerrilleros woke up one morning and found themselves surrounded by local peasants, who, without much discussion, handed them over to the army (URNG Comandante Rolando Moran, 1997). The guerrilla wanted to liberate the peasants, but the peasants themselves were apparently not so eager to be liberated by the guerrilleros. When the first group of guerrilleros from the EGP entered Guatemala from Mexico, they had not a single civilian supporter in the area, according to Mario Payeras, the leading ideologue of the group at the time and member of the group of guerrilleros entering Guatemala from Mexico (Payeras, et al., 1982). Everything had to be constructed from the bottom up, and it took the guerrilla several years before they had built a structure in the Ixil region. But much was destroyed when one young and promising indigenous cadre, "Fonseca", was captured and broke down under intensive torture. Many were arrested and killed because of what Fonseca told his torturers (Payeras, 1989). Fonseca later succeeded in fleeing from an army base, and decided to return to the guerrilla, although he knew he was risking his life by doing so. Once with his old comrades again, he found little compassion. Fonseca was taken out into the forest and executed.

Failing to establish good relations with the local population is always a grave danger for a group of guerrilleros in the jungle or the mountains. The guerrilleros depend on the locals to acquire or buy food and supplies and they also depend on civilians for information about army movements. The first attempt at establishing a guerrilla *foco* in the Lacandon jungle in Chiapas, Mexico, ended in disaster. In 1968, a small group of journalists organised a *foco*, Ejército Insurgente Mexicano (EIM). Without support from the local population, the guerrilleros lived in total isolation in the jungle, until they were discovered by the army. Most of the young, urban guerrilleros were killed or captured (J. Womack, 1999, p. 199). In Bolivia, in 1967, Che Guevara encountered many of these problems as the local peasants were sceptical when he tried to set up a guerrilla organisation. Guevara had a hard time finding locals willing to sell food and, frustrated, he noted in his diary that the peasant must therefore expect a period of terror from both parties (E. Guevara, Sánchez, and Molina, 2007, p. 118).

In his book on guerrilla warfare, Guevara had warned against all forms of abuse or terror against the locals because the long-term survival and growth of the guerrilla organisation depended on winning the hearts and minds of the population. Use of violence or threats of violence could possibly solve a short-term problem, but would in the long run be detrimental to the objectives of the guerrilla organisation. Nonetheless, in the real world of fear, hunger and desperation, many felt forced to use violence or threats of violence when the locals refused to cooperate, as did Guevara himself when he argued that an "adequate strategy of terror" could at least scare the locals from giving information to the army (Prado Salmón, 1990, p. 93). Violence or threats of violence against the civilian population tended to undermine the relationship the guerrilla organization was trying to build with the locals, leading to suspicion and mistrust.

Another difficult theme was so-called "revolutionary justice". The guerrillas dealt harshly with deserters or traitors, as we have already seen. But they also needed to deal effectively with any signs in the local population of cooperation with the army. "Informers", "collaborators" and "traitors" were dangerous and any sign of cooperation with the enemy was dealt with swiftly, as in the case of the "peace judges" appointed by the Nicaraguan regime. Any local "peace judges" could simply be executed. In the memoirs and diaries, these executions are mostly dealt with as part of the daily routine, with little or no sympathy for the victims.

It is not hard to imagine that such practices could get out of hand. The pressure, fear, hard to verify rumours, confusion of war – all contributed to a climate in which mistakes could have terrible consequences. Comandante Santiago tells how, in 1988, a dangerous situation developed into catastrophe in Guatemala (Santa Cruz Mendoza, 2004, p. 146). A patrol on mission on the outskirts of its base areas found itself under pressure when the army went on the offensive. By accident, they were discovered by a group of villagers in the forest. The guerrilleros wrongly suspected that the villagers were army informers. If

information was indeed given to the army, it would jeopardise the security of the whole patrol. Giving credence to rumours and false information, and fearing for their lives, the guerrilleros executed 21 innocent peasants from El Aguacate.

Such abuse was not limited to isolated cases, but was widespread, especially in Guatemala, but also in Nicaragua during the civil war of the 1980s. Comandante Gaspar Ilom (Rodrigo Asturias) explained his shock in discovering that some members of the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR, Rebel Armed Forces) operated a regime of terror in parts of the Guatemalan countryside. All kinds of abuses and human rights violations were committed by these guerrilleros. In this case, something more than fear and confusion seems to be behind the violence, for such widespread abuse can only be explained by general moral decay. We need more investigation on how the mainly urban and educated group of guerrilla leaders constructed understandings of indigenous peoples as "others", defined as a difference in language, religious practices and culture. We can ascertain that such 'others' did not fit well with the dominant theoretical understanding of class struggle and capitalism. While the abuse of indigenous peoples was normally not comparable to the level of violence described by Mkandawire in Africa, it did, in the long run, amount to self-defeating behaviour as the indigenous peoples turned their backs on the guerrilla organisations (Mkandawire, 2002).

I have now argued that a number of generative mechanisms must be considered when trying to understand the root causes of what I have here called a clash between "Northern" perspectives and indigenous realities. In line with Marcos, I have argued that "rigid concepts of the world" were a root cause for the difficult relationship between guerrilleros and indigenous peoples. These rigid concepts must be interpreted in light of the urban background of the leaders of the guerrilla organizations, the particular processes of ideology formation, the consequences of the guerrilla strategy itself and the affective and psychological mechanisms related to the life and dangers of being a guerrilla soldier. In sum, these mechanisms proved to work against any attempt at establishing good and lasting communication with indigenous groups, thus undermining the ability of the guerrilla organisation to listen and learn from the indigenous peoples.

### **The indigenous peoples move to the forefront of the struggle**

Gaspar Ilom (Rodrigo Asturias) broke with the FAR in the early 1970s and founded Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA) which began military operations in 1978/ 1979 (Asturias and ORPA Equipo de Información, 1984). Ilom and ORPA saw the indigenous population of Guatemala as the key to the success of the revolutionary movement, since the indigenous peoples constitute more than half of the Guatemalan population, and a much larger percentage of the poor. According to Ilom, the revolutionary organisation must also fight all forms of racism (Ilom, 1989). The indigenous peoples were now seen as exploited labourers and peasants, in addition to being

victims of discrimination because of their language and ethnic identity. Payeras now also explained that the indigenous peoples had moved to the forefront of the strategy of the newly formed EGP (Payeras, 1991). EGP was also formed by disenchanted former members of the FAR, for example Julio César Macías (Macías, 1997).

This focus on discrimination, ethnicity and identity distinguishes these new organisations from the guerrillas of the 1960s. In the many declarations and statements made public by the guerrilla organisations in the 1960s, these themes were mostly absent and the only references to indigenous peoples or "indios" were in relation to the violence of the Spanish colonisers and sometimes the big landowners – but this was always when discussing the past. Regarding the Atlantic coast area of Nicaragua, for instance, where most of the indigenous peoples and other ethnic minorities live, the FSLN promised to "re-integrate" the area into the "life of the nation" (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, 1961). But in fact many leaders and others from the local communities did not seek to be re-incorporated. They had fond collective memories of a time before being "occupied" by General Cabezas and forcefully annexed by Nicaragua (Freeman, 1988; Gordon, 1998; J. Hodgson, 1987; Hodgson, 2006; Llanes, 1993; Sujo Wilson, 1998). The Sandinistas were not unconcerned with issues of race, for example promising a plan to benefit the coastal area, with the aim of ending discrimination against "Miskitos, Sumos, Zambos and Negros" (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, 1961). But in the day to day struggle of the FSLN, the ethnic minorities continued to play a minimal role. This was possibly the reason why the FSLN had very few supporters on the Atlantic coast.

The EGP set out to organise armed revolution among the indigenous peoples in the densely populated highlands of Guatemala, but when they entered from Chiapas, Mexico, they came without any form of support or network in those areas. In fact, indigenous peoples and their situation play a minor role in the memoirs of Macías (Macías, 1997). Much is centred on the military campaign and the organisation itself. Payeras has written extensively on military strategy and political organising as well as issues concerning the local population (Payeras, 1987, 1991), and in one article he deals specifically with the relationship between guerrilla and indigenous peoples (Payeras, 1983) acknowledging that they are exploited by the capitalist system and the regime and discriminated against by non-indigenous Guatemalans. This double oppression will only be overcome if the revolutionary forces win, according to Payeras. Joining the guerrilla is therefore the only viable solution for the indigenous peoples. Reading these and other memoirs, one is tempted to believe that the newfound interest in indigenous peoples was largely due to military concerns rather than any deeper ideological conviction. There is little evidence in the diaries and communiqués from the guerrilleros of any real attempt or willingness to enter into a dialogue with the indigenous peoples in an effort to learn and possibly have "rigid concepts" challenged by "the indigenous reality", as it later was expressed by subcomandante Marcos (Gilly et al., 1995). The first generation of guerrilleros had become isolated in remote and inaccessible areas, cut off from the daily life of ordinary Guatemalans. Macías, Payeras, Moran,

Asturias and others realised that the guerrilla could only win if they succeeded in gaining a foothold in more populous regions such as the highlands.

The Sandinistas did succeed in establishing a firm base in the few indigenous neighbourhoods on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua, particularly in Subtiava and Masaya. This was not something completely new, since in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Sandino and his army had established themselves in the Rio Coco region – a region traditionally dominated by Miskito and Sumu/Mayangna communities. Organising in Subtiava, the indigenous neighbourhood of Leon, Nicaragua, Cabezas "discovered" that the "Subtiavans" had indigenous roots, and took advantage of this when recruiting new members and supporters (Cabezas, 1985, p. 56) although there appears to have been little reflection on the meaning of these roots – ethnic identity was chiefly something the guerrilla used to its own ends, at least judged by what guerrilleros tell us in diaries and communiqués. The Sandinistas picked up a few elements from indigenous history and mythology and decided to blend their stories of Sandino and his struggle with that of the aboriginal hero Adiac. In the version of the Sandinistas, Sandino and Adiac are fused, emerging as one. Nonetheless, the Sandinistas always read Sandino through the lens of the Communist Manifesto (Cabezas, 1985, p. 54) This does not mean that the indigenous men and women on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua were voiceless victims of Sandinista manipulation.

When the FSLN launched its final offensive, it appealed to "the nation of workers", including "Indians" and "workers, peasants, students and all patriotic and honourable Nicaraguans" (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, 1978). But after winning power the Sandinista leaders engaged in a long workshop in Managua, hammering out a programme for the new revolutionary government. The result was a carefully worded document wrapped in a Marxist Leninist discourse of scientific socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat (Ramírez, 1999). Much later, many of the then Sandinista leaders acknowledged that they did not understand the realities of the indigenous peoples and the ethnic minorities on the Atlantic coast. In addition, the theoretical framework did not contemplate that Nicaragua was a multi-ethnic society, with the result that the Sandinistas were ill-equipped to handle the cultural diversity on the Atlantic coast (Gordon, 1998). While many Sandinistas felt sympathy for the indigenous peoples, they also tended to see indigenous cultures as "backward". In their view, the coastal area needed modernisation, a programme to make all the peoples of Nicaragua Nicaraguans. Being Nicaraguan was closely linked to being Mestizo in the collective imagination of most Nicaraguans (Freeman, 1988; M. Gonzales; Miguel Gonzales, 2001; Gordon, 1998; Hale, 1994; Hooker, 2005). Many saw the process of transforming Mestizos ("Mestizaje") as key to constructing a truly national identity in Nicaragua. In this context, being different, wanting to be recognised as a different people or nation was not easily understood by the majority of Nicaraguans.

The guerrilla organisations saw the indigenous peoples, first and foremost, as a group that could potentially support the revolutionary organisation and the revolutionary struggle. They were free to join the revolutionary forces, but had

no agency in setting the goals and visions for that revolution. The indigenous peoples evoked compassion in the guerrillas, but in the revolutionary literature produced in these countries at this time they were primarily seen as peasants, not as social actors and the subjects of history.

For social movement scholars and activists this analysis raises important questions. First, social movements are often organized around claims of rights or justice for a group or community, in this cases "the people" or "the nation". Activists and scholars need to evaluate such claims carefully. Who is this "people" or "nation"? Are there processes of exclusion from these groups? Are there groups with justified claims to be different from the proposed notions of "nation" or "people"? Second, activists and scholars must carefully and critically consider claims of being the representatives of such groups and communities.

### **Struggle for autonomy, from Nicaragua to Chiapas**

The Zapatistas in Chiapas are different from the guerrillas in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua for many reasons, but some similarities also stand out. First, the EZLN was formed by an organisation heavily influenced by Guevara. EZLN was formed in the Lacandon as a traditional *foco*, in many ways similar to the FMLN in the FSLN in the 1960s and the EGP in the late 1970s. But in the Lacandon the cadres met with indigenous peoples with their own tradition for organising, a tradition which had at least three roots. First, many local organisations grew as a consequence of outside pressure – as when neighbouring villages gathered to fight cattle farmers and demand more land (the fight for more land clashed with government's intentions of creating national reserves, removing small farmers from the jungle). Second, the local organisations received support from a number of national bodies, for instance the Línea Proletaria, Organización Campesina Emiliano Zapata (OCEZ) and La Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos (CIOAC). Especially Línea Proletaria played an important role in developing local traditions for organising in the Lacandon (J. Womack, 1999; J. Womack, Jr., 1998).

Línea Proletaria was a Maoist organisation, but in contrast to some others which mixed Marxism with calls for indigenous resistance, for example in Peru, Línea Proletaria was in no hurry to lead the masses into conflict and revolutionary war (Orive, 1977). According to Línea Proletaria, "the masses" could themselves "create history" if they were empowered to make their own decisions (Orive, 1977, pp. 1-12). Línea Proletaria therefore argued against leading the masses "like fathers" because leadership from above does not teach anyone how good ideas are born (Orive, 1977). Third, the Catholic Church led by the bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas, Samuel Ruíz, set out in the 1960s to fight poverty and the exclusion of the indigenous peoples (Santiago, 1999; J. Womack, Jr., 1998). Ruíz created a network of religious leaders in villages, making sure that many promising young men received education. He was inspired by the movement of change affecting the Catholic Church, especially



after the conference of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. The bishops condemned poverty and institutionalised violence, and called for a will to freedom. The bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas organised a congress of "Indios" in 1974, inviting 1250 delegates from 327 villages and the resulting document continued to play a vital role in local organising for many years, calling for profound changes in Mexican society (Ruiz, 1994).

Other factors also contributed to constructing an environment for the development of the EZLN very different from the guerrillas in Guatemala and Nicaragua. After winning the trust of the local organisations, the EZLN grew rapidly, reaching a total of several thousand guerrilleros in a few years (Tello Diaz, 2001). The region where EZLN grew most rapidly, las Cañadas, was virtually outside government control, facilitating not only covert military training, but also semi-open political organisation. The EZLN put together several large congresses in las Cañadas, some with several hundred participants (Tello Diaz, 2001). The local conditions in las Cañadas allowed the development of an organisation very different from those of Central America, making discussion and participation possible in a way unthinkable in Nicaragua in the 1960s and Guatemala in the 1970s. The decision to go to war was apparently made at a meeting in a small village, Prado, in January 1993, almost a year before the fighting actually began (Tello Diaz, 2001). The final decision was made only after a long process of consultation, and apparently against the will of many of the educated cadres from the cities. Much is still unclear about this process, but according to the Zapatistas themselves and former Zapatistas like subcomandante Daniel (Tello Diaz, 2001), it seems that a majority of indigenous members of the EZLN voted in favour of going to war while many of the urban and educated cadres protested by leaving the organization after the decision was taken.

The first Zapatista declaration nonetheless contained no reference to the indigenous identity of the insurgents although the insurgents referred to their identities as peasant, landless, exploited and Mexican (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, Monsiváis and Poniatsowska, 1994). Later, especially after the failed peace negotiations with the Mexican government in 1995, indigenous identity and ethnic rights came to the forefront of the struggle (Krøvel, 2006; Pablos, 1996). The Zapatistas invited 358 Mexican and international advisors to the negotiations, firmly framing the struggle within the paradigm of the growing global indigenous movement (Aubry and Mattiace, 2002; A. Brysk, 2002).

A closer study of some Zapatista texts reveals some similarities with the Sandinistas of Nicaragua (Subcomandante Marcos, 1998, 2001a, 2001b; Subcomandante Marcos, Saramago, and Leon, 2001). The military leader, subcomandante Marcos, tells the story of "Votán Zapata", a figure combining indigenous mythology and elements from the life of revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata (de Vos, 2002, 2003; Michel, 2001). The story resembles the story told by the young Sandinistas to motivate the poor neighbourhoods of Leon in the early 1970s, combining elements from the life of Sandino with elements from the oral histories of Adiac, a leader much venerated by the

indigenous peoples in Nicaragua (Cabezas, 1985, p. 53). It would be wrong, though, to equate the mechanical modernism and lack of connectedness of the early Sandinistas with the Zapatistas of Chiapas. On a number of occasions, indigenous leaders have spoken for the Zapatistas, for example comandante Ramona, and comandante Esther, who spoke in the Mexican Congress in 2001. The vast majority of the Zapatistas belonged to the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, and had voice and vote in defining goals and methods for the organisation. The organisation listened and learned, and it changed and developed as a consequence of the encounter with the indigenous reality of Chiapas (Gilly, et al., 1995; Marcos, 1999, 2001, 2008). The changes are not only visible in the ideology of the EZLN, as noted by many visitors to Zapatistas (John Berger, 1999; García Márquez, 2001), but also in the organizational structures of the EZLN, which today are very different from anything seen in revolutionary movements before. The Zapatistas have developed institutions and procedures for participatory and collective decision making processes at the levels of the village, the municipality and the region, reflecting the ideological developments as a consequence of the encounters with the indigenous reality of Chiapas (Henck, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have put the complex and complicated relationship between guerrillas and indigenous peoples in context. Inspired by the Cuban experience, many came to the conclusion that guerrilla warfare was the best strategy for the acquisition of power. This led to militaristic organisations, marked by hierarchical, centralised and inflexible structures which did not facilitate processes of learning and dialogue. I have sought to suggest that a greater emphasis on dialogical learning and co-operative organisation in the context of seeking to understand indigenous peoples and their worldviews could have contributed to the avoidance of the types of tendencies to self-destructive behaviour (Mkandawire, 2002) which I have analysed in this article.

There is a great need for more investigation into the armed organisations' abilities to learn and grow from the encounters with indigenous peoples, and how this affected the outcomes of their struggles. Moreover, the Zapatista experience demonstrates that a different type of encounter was, and remains possible, given the right circumstances

I believe further research into the relationship between guerrilla organisations, indigenous peoples and repression will enrich our understanding of the history of social movements in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Mexico. But I also believe that what we already know of the experiences discussed in this article raises some important questions for future research on social movements in Latin America and beyond: Who do the movements represent? What type of communication and learning goes on within the social movement? Are certain groups excluded from fully participating? These questions challenge some of the

traditional categories and perspectives associated with Marxist analysis, by instead focusing on the lived experiences of the participants in these movements and the relationships with society which they develop.

They also raise a number of other questions such as: how are participants changed by their experiences?; how do social agents outside the guerrilla interpret and relate to the movement?; how are particular tactics or strategies shaped by misunderstandings, lack of openness or even fixed categories such as the idea of the "new man" which invisibilise emotions such as fear, sadness and compassion? By addressing these complexities, we develop a greater sensitivity to the subaltern experience of revolutionary struggles, which can enrich our understanding of the realities and challenges which confront a movement aspiring towards national liberation.

The experiences from Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas indicate that such questions need to be investigated in order to understand why some movements fail, and others succeed, in their struggles.

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