

## **The Zapatistas of Chiapas:** Challenges and Contradictions

Review Essay by Monique Nuijten and Gemma van der Haar

- *The Chiapas Rebellion; the Struggle for Land and Democracy*, by N. Harvey. Durham and London: Duke University, 1998.
- *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, edited by J. Holloway and E. Peláez. London: Pluto Press, 1998.
- *Religión, política y guerrilla en las Cañadas de la selva Lacandona*, by C. Legorreta Díaz. México D. F.: Cal y Arena, 1998.

Ever since their appearance in the public arena on the first of January 1994, the Zapatistas<sup>1</sup> of Chiapas have been accompanied by wonder and admiration, both in Mexico and abroad. The movement has both questioned the Mexican political system and inspired new ways of doing politics. It escapes orthodox schemes for revolutionary change and challenges existing views on grassroots organisations, social movements, and state-peasant relations. Many people – especially but not solely those calling themselves ‘radical’ or ‘leftist’ – embrace what they see as the Zapatista’s fresh political ideas. The Zapatista vocabulary of dignity, participation (‘nunca más un México sin nosotros’) and accountability (‘mandar obedeciendo’) has been widely adopted.

Since 1994, a huge number of publications on the EZLN have seen the light.<sup>2</sup> The books under review here were published in 1998. They look in different ways at the historical processes that gave rise to the movement, its characteristics, and its contribution to processes of democratisation and recognition of indigenous rights in Mexico. Neil Harvey links the rise of the EZLN to the background of broader political and economic developments in Chiapas. His analysis goes beyond recent events and takes the reader back to discussions on the Mexican Revolution, Agrarian Reform and the historical configuration of the Mexican political system. Harvey analyses the Zapatista movement within a general theoretical framework of state formation and social movements, which provides a basis to assess its significance for Mexican politics.

While Harvey strikes a balance between historical analysis and the political significance of the movement, the other two books focus more on only one of these two dimensions without, however, completely neglecting the other. Carmen Legorreta offers a detailed account of the history of organisation of the indigenous peasant communities of the region of Las Cañadas (the ‘cradle’ of the EZLN) since the 1970s, providing the context in which Zapatismo emerged as one of the political options. Based on her experience as an advisor to one of the biggest and most important organisations in the region, the *Unión de Uniones* (UU), she spells out the ways in which different social actors, especial-

ly the Catholic Church and political activists of different backgrounds, shaped this process, not seldom in opposition to each other.

The volume edited by John Holloway and Eloina Peláez, rather than explaining Zapatismo in relation to historical configurations, takes it as a source of inspiration for new ways of organising society and of carrying on opposition against neo-liberalism. The different contributions to the volume explore the political ideas and new ways of doing politics that Zapatismo offers. Much use is made of communiqués and speeches of the Zapatistas.

The Zapatista uprising has known very few neutral observers. The nature of the conflict has generated opposite stances, a situation reflected in the books reviewed here. Both Harvey and the contributors to the edited volume by Holloway and Peláez write about the Zapatistas of Chiapas with great sympathy, stressing their promises for social change in Mexico. Legorreta, on the contrary, is extremely critical of the movement; she considers it disruptive to the processes of social change in Chiapas and emphasises its high social expense for the indigenous population of the Cañadas region.

### **Marginalisation, Peasant Organising, and the State**

In their analyses of the political and economic developments leading to the Zapatista uprising, both Harvey and Legorreta underline the conditions of poverty and marginalisation, the repression of independent peasant movements, and the impact of neoliberal policies as favourable to the rise of the EZLN. Though Harvey and Legorreta differ as to their ultimate judgement of the Zapatista movement, their accounts are in many ways complementary. Harvey's approach links the events in Chiapas to broader political developments and to the debate on social movements, which permits him to see how economic struggles have become increasingly articulated in a cultural-political discourse on indigenous autonomy. Legorreta concentrates on the Cañadas region itself, providing a detailed analysis of the processes of formation (and dissolution) of peasant organisations, in which she herself was closely involved. From both accounts a picture of great complexity emerges. Peasant organising was shaped in the interaction between, on the one hand, (mostly) indigenous peasant communities confronting highly adverse living conditions and marginalisation, and on the other, different political agents, notably the San Cristóbal diocese and political advisors from northern Mexico, entering the region with their own (long-term, abstract and often utopian) agendas. The EZLN, which made its appearance in the Cañadas-region in 1983, builds on these earlier experiences of organisation and operates partly through its structures, but offers a new avenue for change: that of armed struggle.

An indigenous congress in 1974 marked the rise of independent peasant organising in Chiapas. Several grassroots organisations consequently became connected to nation-wide movements of *ejidatarios* and agricultural workers. They emerged throughout Mexico in the 1970s, and started to challenge the CNC (*Confederación Nacional Campesina*) as the sole representative of rural demands.<sup>3</sup> In this context the *Unión de Uniones* (later known as ARIC-UU) was formed, and it became one of the most important precedents to the EZLN. Agrarian conflicts (especially the one over the so-called *Decreto Lacandón*,

which granted over 600,000 hectares of communal lands to a small group of Lacandón Indians, threatening over thirty *ejidos* with eviction) and the commercialisation of coffee were two issues that worked as catalysts in the growth and consolidation of the UU.

Harvey argues that independent peasant organisations in Mexico face crucial dilemmas in their relationship to the political system. Legorreta makes it clear that these dilemmas were also highly relevant in the case of the UU. Whereas other peasant organisations opted for a confrontational stance toward the state, the UU chose a position of negotiation, seeking to open up political space. The answer of the state government however – which has to be understood in the context of a fear of an expansion of the revolutionary struggle of Guatemala – was repression. In the 1980s an average of two politically motivated killings per month were reported, especially affecting independent organisations. Social policy in Chiapas since the 1980s only served to exacerbate social and agrarian conflicts. The *Plan Chiapas* (1983) and the *Plan de Rehabilitación Agraria* (1984), issued to deal with growing peasant unrest, did nothing to address issues of political domination and instead provoked divisions within peasant movements.

It is in this context of selective state repression and increasingly contradictory political options that the EZLN emerged and was consolidated. The breakdown of other alternatives of political organisation, and specifically the crisis and rupture within the UU, triggered an accelerated growth of the EZLN. During the year 1988 to 1989, the number of armed combatants grew from 80 to 1,300. Many *ejidos* that participated in the ARIC-UU saw their members join the Zapatistas, who began to organise their own committees of clandestine government and purchase guns. By 1992 support for the Zapatistas had spread throughout the Cañadas. Whereas the Cañadas population had initially maintained the UU and the EZLN as parallel and complementary options, in the 1990s these gradually became antagonistic and mutually exclusive.

Neoliberal policies since 1992 deepened the crisis: the livelihoods of the Cañadas population were negatively affected by the withdrawal of support for coffee and basic grains, restrictive forestry laws and the abolishment of further agrarian reform (threatening especially the younger, landless generation of peasants). Thus, the ‘armed option’ became inevitable, an event cautiously applauded by Harvey and deeply deplored by Legorreta.

According to Legorreta, the uprising eventually disrupted the modest advances the ARIC-UU had been making in satisfying peasant demands through negotiation with the government. Though her intimate knowledge of these processes is undeniable, Legorreta’s conclusion regarding the success of the ARIC-UU prior to 1 January 1994 seems somewhat naive. The willingness of the government to attend to the demands of the ARIC-UU most probably has to be understood as a strategy to lure the Cañadas population away from the armed movement, whose existence was well known to politicians at the time.

### **The Re-signification of the Revolutionary Imagery and a New Political Culture?**

The characteristic way of operation that the Zapatistas developed over the years, especially their particular mode of decision-making, their use of the media and their linkages to different sectors of society, has received much attention. The *Convención Nacional Democrática* in 1995 is considered to be a clear example of the way in which the movement has been able to link up with urban civil society. Holloway and Peláez pay much attention to the use of electronic media and symbolism by the Zapatistas and argue that the EZLN has led to a 'renaissance of oppositional culture'. Rajchenberg and Héau-Lambert dedicate a special chapter in the book to symbolism in the Zapatista movement and the use of historical figures and events. They discuss how the EZLN has managed to deritualise politics and make fun of its sacred forms, portraying, for example, the state party as a tarantula, and its opponent as a beetle. In this way, they argue, the poetry of the EZLN is inspired by the past, from which it draws its identity, its symbols and its heroes. In the same book Cleaver discusses what he calls the 'electronic fabric of the struggle'. He shows how information from the region is directly spread out through sympathisers with help of Chiapas-based NGOs. This is described as part of new, so-called 'rhizomatic' forms of organisation, through which exchange (and mobilisation) can take place without being hierarchical and centralised.

Harvey agrees that the rebellion in Chiapas is a new type of political movement. Obviously there have been many rural movements in Mexico that have used the symbol of Zapata. The struggle against local and regional caciques and corrupt government officials is also not new. Yet Harvey sees the novelty of the movement in the critique of authoritarian centralist politics in Mexico and the stress on democratisation of the political process in the whole country. This is strengthened by the fact that the Zapatistas themselves are said to have organised their rebellion through consensual decision-making in the communities. This practice of community-based democracy and the call for accountability are embraced as an alternative to the Mexican political culture of clientelism, co-optation and corruption. Holloway and Peláez put much emphasis on the fact that unlike almost all previous revolutions, the Zapatista movement does not aim to take power. According to them, the fact that a revolutionary organisation such as the EZLN is struggling not to take power but to abolish power makes it extraordinary and marks a radical break with the traditions of the revolutionary and the non-revolutionary left. In the last chapter Holloway explores the newness of Zapatismo as compared to 'classic' types of revolutions, by placing 'dignity' at the centre of the struggle. Explicit reference is made to the areas in which Zapatismo diverges from Marxist-Leninist ideas on revolution and change. According to the former, a revolution has no set end terms, but finds its way as it goes; it is also a concept that facilitates linkages to other sectors of society. Harvey agrees that EZLN's declarations and the trajectory of the EZLN can be seen as a novel attempt to articulate a new radical democratic imagery within Mexican civil society. The political message required a new language, and it was found in the convergence of the Zapatistas' critical interpretation of Mexican history and the people's own stories of humiliation, exploitation, and racism.

In contrast to these two books, Legorreta is critical about the EZLN. Rather than focussing on the newness or the uniqueness of the movement, she explains how the uprising could occur without attributing any special characteristics to the movement. She does not conceal where her own sympathies lie, namely with the UU and their strategies of negotiation. As she is much opposed to the armed struggle of the EZLN, she does not engage in the discussion of the supposed impact of the Zapatistas on the development of a new political discourse and political practices in Mexico. Her account also sheds quite a different light on the assumed democratic nature of decision-making in peasant communities, and her analysis suggests that the EZLN has been far less democratic than assumed and that it can be repressive towards people who are critical about the movement or who want to follow different strategies.

### **Division and Contradictory Results of the Chiapas Movement**

The three books differ greatly in the attention they pay to the social expense of the movement and the differential impact on different sectors of the population. The articles in Holloway's book take such an ideological position in favour of the EZLN that hardly any words are given to the possible negative sides of the movement. Harvey and Legorreta discuss the consequences of militarisation of the area and the division within communities that was caused by the movement. Harvey discusses the social expense of the movement, which he sees as a possible obstacle to a peaceful and democratic outcome. The population was not entirely in favour of Zapatismo and the uprising knows many losers. Many people who withdrew from the movement were forced to leave the region. Thus, the opening of new spaces for political struggle in Chiapas has implied serious sacrifice for the population. At least 145 people, mostly Zapatistas, died in the first days of January 1994 as federal troops attempted to crush the rebellion. The rebellion itself was not universally accepted in the Cañadas, and several thousand Indians decided to abandon their homes and seek refuge in urban centres rather than be caught between two armies. The creation of new political spaces requires that communities put much effort in seeking alliances with outside actors and political forces and not all community members may be in agreement. In many highland communities crises of representation led to protracted struggles to fill a political vacuum. In these conditions there is also a tendency toward an increasing polarisation of groups and organisations.

It will be obvious that Legorreta puts special emphasis on the social expense of the movement. She makes it very clear that according to her Zapatismo is not the right way and not a viable option. In effect, thanks to her negative attitude towards the Zapatista uprising, Legorreta gives us a glimpse of aspects of the movement that have remained concealed in most other accounts. In this way it forms a necessary counterbalance to overly sympathetic and optimistic accounts of Zapatismo. A serious limitation in her work is, however, that she seems to settle accounts with her adversaries in the regional political arena, and this strongly influences her analysis. Options and projects she does not approve of are painted in negative terms. For example, the diocese of San Cristobal is depicted extremely negatively as only interested in its own power basis and in political and ideological control over the population. This is in

great contrast to the UU, which is described as the only viable and democratic way forward. In the same vein she argues that the EZLN brought about the dissolution of the political space that had still been open for the people at the basis. She argues that the armed struggle, the violence and opposition against the state – which find their origins in the EZLN and the diocese of San Cristobal – are the main obstacles for the development of the indigenous population in Las Cañadas.

It is also interesting to note the differing ways in which the three books deal with the gender aspects of the EZLN. They all pay some attention to the implications of the movement for the position of women. Millán (in Holloway and Peláez) describes how indigenous women have become more visible and have created more space for themselves within and through the Zapatista uprising. She analyses the role of women within the EZLN. The Revolutionary women's law is discussed which grants women greater freedom in matters of marriage and sexuality and equal participation in the community, particularly regarding access to land. Although Millán's article presents a nice overview of the role of women in the EZLN, her analysis seems too simplistic. Harvey and Legorreta also discuss this liberating role of the EZLN and the fact that the EZLN provides a new space for women and young girls who have appreciated the chance to learn how to read and write and participate in the struggle. Yet they also point out that in many cases, a woman's decision to leave her community for the mountains is seen as a violation of traditional norms that can give rise to all kinds of tensions and struggles within the family and community. Harvey adds that the ambivalent reaction to the use of sexual violence by the military against indigenous women shows the contradictory position of the EZLN towards gender issues. Harvey argues that although a number of cases of rape by soldiers and police were denounced, the EZLN took hardly any action and a blanket of silence covered the majority of abuses. By 1996, many grassroots activists were perplexed by the weakness of the Zapatista's response to this issue. Indigenous women still felt alone in their struggle for respect and dignity.

### **Future Impacts of the Movement: Inspiration and Hope**

A central question for many people is whether the Zapatistas in Chiapas will be able to bring about fundamental changes in the Mexican political system and succeed in setting the agenda for future political movements. Can the EZLN make a change for the future of Chiapas and Mexico? According to Harvey, the EZLN has already made a profound and indelible impact. The EZLN has been successful in making the recognition of the rights and culture of indigenous peoples an integral part of the debate on democratisation in Mexico. According to the author it is likely that the indigenous peoples will play a fundamental role in the future transformation of Mexico. Things political have changed as a result of the Chiapas rebellion and it is impossible to return to the status quo ante. The authors in the book by Holloway and Peláez share this optimism and argue that the EZLN has proven to be an alternative, new way of organising society and a radical change.

Yet, perhaps this conclusion is too optimistic. It remains to be seen whether the Chiapas movement will indeed have the profound effects on Mexican poli-

tics that Harvey and the authors in the book by Holloway and Peláez seem to agree upon. The legal recognition of indigenous rights has been in an impasse since president Zedillo rejected the proposal for constitutional reform that had come out of the peace talks with the EZLN. Efforts of the state government to tackle agrarian conflicts (buying land for peasant groups) and problems of poverty and marginalisation (investing in rural infrastructure and services) have not solved the structural problems of political exclusion and repression in Chiapas. Rather, they go in tandem with strategies of low intensity warfare, aiming to wear down communities and groups who have been identified as pro-Zapatista.

At the same time, numerous leftist politicians and intellectuals have tried to appropriate the movement for their own projects in their own terms. King and Villanueva (in Holloway and Peláez) sketch how the traditional left has had problems in classifying and appreciating the Zapatistas, whereas people with experience in grass root organising have given the EZLN a place in their own struggles. Zapatismo to them indicates a new way towards a democratic revolution. The optimism about the importance of the EZLN and the arbitrary ways in which the movement has often been appropriated and used in different political projects can also be analysed in terms of the eagerness of intellectuals and social activists alike to believe in change. They tend to attach meanings to the EZLN that respond to their own desire for change in Mexico. Many are only too happy to have a new movement to cling to – a movement that breaks away from traditional peasant movements and that follows new strategies. Such a movement might be capable of succeeding where many others before have failed.

This struggle around the ‘truth’ of the EZLN and the efforts to appropriate the movement for different political projects has placed the EZLN itself in a difficult position. Although the EZLN requires broader support from political groups and intellectuals in general society, they do not want to be used for the projects of others. The strained and conflicting relationship with the left-wing party PRD is a good example of this tension. Although the PRD has been the party most sympathetic towards the EZLN, the call of the EZLN to boycott the municipal elections of 1995 and 1998 had very negative results for the PRD. The future of the EZLN may well be determined by the way in which they manage these contradictory relationships with other sectors of society. The leaders of the EZLN are well aware of this tension and have tried to keep up a dialogue with different political and intellectual groups without letting themselves be incorporated or corrupted by the political projects of others.

However, many analysts do not seem to acknowledge this fundamental tension in the existence of the EZLN. For example, Legorreta, who criticises the EZLN for not searching for a peaceful political solution, seems to have forgot the long history of co-optation of oppositional movements by the Mexican state. Considering the great capacity of the Mexican state of repeatedly entering into dialogue, offering hopes and making small changes but without really tackling the exploitation and oppression of the indigenous populations, it is not difficult to imagine what would have happened if the EZLN had entered the formal political arena. At the start many promises would have been made to them, some agrarian conflicts would have been resolved, more services would have been brought to the communities and some leaders from Chiapas would

have become important figures at the national level. Yet, after a time the population of Chiapas would have asked themselves what had happened to all the other promises that were made to them, where their leaders had gone, and what strategic mistakes they had made in their political negotiations.

Taking into account the history of violence of the Mexican state towards indigenous and oppositional groups in relation to land conflicts, Legorreta makes an objectionable remark when she says that it is thanks to the great capacity of the Mexican state to search for political intermediation that a civil war was avoided. The uprising in Chiapas was precisely a response to decades of exploitation, arbitrary killings and injustices towards the indigenous population and a failure of the Mexican state to mediate in regional problems (as Legorreta herself clearly shows). Yet, as Harvey points out, the EZLN faces the problem of any rural social movement that simultaneously strives for independence and representation in an authoritarian political system. It is the dilemma of a movement that wants to be taken seriously by the existing political system, but that at the same time is aware of the risks involved in getting too close to it. It is the dilemma of participating without becoming encapsulated, and it does not allow for easy strategies.

## Notes

1. The combatants and sympathizers of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) are generally referred to as 'Zapatistas', although some authors prefer to call them 'neo-Zapatistas'. They should not be confused with the followers of general Emiliano Zapata, hero of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), who provided the inspiration for the name of the EZLN.
2. For a review of a considerable number of publications that came out in 1994, see 'Chiapas in Rebellion: an early assessment' by David G. LaFrance (1996) in *Mexican Studies/ Estudios Mexicanos* 12(1) p.91-105.
3. Of particular importance in Chiapas were CIOAC, OCEZ and CNPA.