Zapatismo: Resistance, Revolution, Reform, and the Preservation of Hope
“...[T]he revolt of the Chiapanecos is something stunningly new, the first shots of a rebellion consciously aimed at the new world order, the dire consequences of a history that did not die as predicted but intrudes in the most pernicious manner on the way of life of people always overlooked. It is a war against the globalization of the market, against the destruction of nature and the confiscation of resources, against the termination of indigenous peoples and their lands, against the growing maldistribution of wealth and the consequent decline in standards of living for all but the rich.”¹ This quote, from The Nation’s Andrew Kopkind, aptly captures the transformative impact of the militant struggle initiated by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) on January 1, 1994 in Chiapas, Mexico. On that day, the EZLN, composed primarily of impoverished, indigenous fighters, launched an assault not only against local or national structures of power, but also against the larger global post-Cold War capitalist system. In an international political climate in which any alternative to the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism could be easily dismissed as a failure, having “collapsed” alongside the Soviet Union, the Zapatistas offered a stirring example of the continued relevancy of mass movements intent on achieving emancipatory social change even after the supposed “end of history.”² However, despite the clear and immediate impact of the EZLN’s uprising as “something stunningly new,”³ the Zapatistas cannot be neatly categorized as either a totally unique ideological and political movement or the direct historical successor of any previously existing political incarnation. Instead, Zapatismo should be understood as a heterodox, often contradictory amalgamation of various ideologies and methods shaped by its own unique historical context. Zapatismo is, at

² A concept (in)famously delineated by Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 work, The End of History and the Last Man. Fukuyama surmised that the end of the Cold War would signal “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy.”
³ "Opening Shots" in The Zapatista Reader, 19.
once, old and new; local, national(ist), and global; revolutionary and reformist. It is through the juxtaposition of these apparent contradictions that the EZLN’s initial uprising, immediate global impact, and continued struggle can be best understood.

**Initial Uprising**

Before engaging in an analysis of the Zapatista’s ideology or wider impact, it is first necessary to begin with an examination of the EZLN’s initial uprising as a transformative event in and of itself. On January 1, 1994 the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect in Canada, the United States, and Mexico—after years of debate, negotiations, and political maneuvering dating back to 1986. On that same day, in the cold pre-dawn hours, the EZLN launched an armed uprising in Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, far from the halls of power in Ottawa, Washington D.C., and Mexico City. By dawn, 3,000 members of the EZLN, wearing ski masks and red bandanas, occupied six large towns (including the Chiapan capital city San Cristóbal de las Casas and the municipal seats in Ocosingo, Las Margaritas, and Altamirano) and hundreds of ranches. 4 In Ocosingo and San Cristóbal, the rebel forces released 230 prisoners from four different jails and destroyed land records used as legal justification for cattle ranchers’ sweeping land claims. 5 Seizing XEOCH, the state radio station broadcasting to southeastern Chiapas, the Zapatistas made their presence felt, playing rancheros, folk music, and “The Internationale”, and announcing a series of new measures, including the expropriation of the local Banamex (Bank of Mexico) branch, the release of all prisoners not incarcerated for murder or drug trafficking, the cessation of rent payments for tenants who had occupied the same

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space for 15 years or longer, and a vigilant campaign to punish wife beaters. 6 For the inhabitants of Chiapas, it was immediately clear that the Zapatistas were intent on establishing a new order.

In most instances, the Zapatistas’ initial armed actions were met with little resistance, allowing the rebels to enter towns nearly unencumbered, easily taking control of the local police station and town center. The EZLN’s element of surprise was not merely the result of good fortune, but is a testament to the seeming impossibility of any armed uprising offering an alternative to the global status quo in a post-Cold War era in which neoliberal “free trade” reigned supreme. In Ocosingo in the months preceding the Zapatista uprising, rumors of the existence of an indigenous guerrilla force in the surrounding areas terrified the local landowning ranchers, whose power was maintained by guardias blancas (“white guards”) acting as a paramilitary force terrorizing impoverished indigenous peons that might threaten their vast landholdings. However, local Brigadier General Miguel Godínez offhandedly dismissed these concerns as unsubstantiated paranoia and allowed the Ocosingo military detachment its regular holiday leave, affirming to the press: “There is no guerrilla.” 7 In a dramatic twist of fate, Zapatistas entering Ocosingo on January 1, 1994 triumphantly graffitied the walls of the town with a defiant: “There is no guerrilla!” 8

This phrase is not only a rebellious jab at the smug assurances of the local general, but also symbolizes the wider global struggle initiated by the Zapatistas on that January morning in Chiapas, Mexico. Through their militant action, the EZLN affirmed the power of a nascent guerrilla force whose existence, although long apparent beneath the surface, could be confidently

7 Ibid., 22.
8 Ibid.
dismissed as an impossibility by those in positions of power as long as their denials and reassurances were not directly contradicted by the open resistance made manifest by the Zapatistas on January 1, 1994. On a wider scale, the denial of the viability of any alternative to the existing order is often used by the powerful to reaffirm the hegemony of systems maintained by the exploitation and oppression that inevitably generates the very resistance they so vehemently deny. In this sense, the EZLN’s scrolling of: “There is no guerrilla!” on the walls of Ocosingo also has a wider global impact as the defiant statement of a counter-hegemonic resistance movement, mocking the confident assurances of the powerful, and invoking images of Margaret Thatcher’s famous slogan: “There is no alternative.”

Through their open, militant defiance, the Zapatistas proved not only that there are guerrillas in Chiapas, but that there is an alternative to the power of neoliberal capitalist globalization.

In one particularly striking incident indicative of the Zapatista’s unheralded initial entry onto the world stage, the local San Cristóbal paper, *Tiempo* and the nearby Ranch Nuevo military base both remained unaware of the Zapatistas’ presence even after the EZLN had already taken control of the town. At 1:00 A.M. on the first of January, *Tiempo*’s editor, Amado Avendaño received a phone call inquiring about a possible disturbance in the city. Lacking any knowledge of the Zapatista uprising, Avendaño phoned the military at the Ranch Nuevo military base to follow up on the caller’s concern. Also ignorant of the EZLN’s presence in the city, the military called the police station in San Cristóbal only to be answered by the voice of the Zapatistas’ unofficial spokesman Subcomandante Marcos on the other end. In an absurd event suited more to slapstick comedy or a newspaper comic strip than an armed guerrilla uprising, Marcos informed the concerned caller that everything was in order, causing the military to

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9 The British Prime minister frequently used this phrase to present free trade, capitalist markets, and neoliberal globalization as the only viable socio-economic and political model.
remain in the barracks all night. When the local townspeople and tourist population awoke, the Zapatistas were already firmly in control of the capital city. In a much-publicized occurrence indicative of the calm initial hours of Zapatista control, a Swiss couple confusedly informed Subcomandante Marcos that “[w]e have reservations to visit the ruins at Palenque tomorrow,” to which Marcos responded kindly: “We apologize for the inconveniences, but this is a revolution.”

Still, despite its largely inconspicuous inception, the EZLN’s uprising did not avoid the wrath of the state’s armed apparatus altogether. Although there was only minimal fighting on that New Year’s Day, including the nearly uncontested capture of San Cristóbal de las Casas, the rebels did encounter significant resistance at Ocosingo. During eight hours of combat, approximately 400 Zapatistas fought between 20 and 30 state police in a battle for control of the city hall. After the Zapatistas had captured the city, a second battle occurred at the Ocosingo town market where the rebels had gathered their forces. This confrontation between the military and the Zapatistas quickly became a massacre as four army battalions, accompanied by paratroopers dropped from 14 Mexican Air Force planes, entered the fray. Prior to embarking in combat, the soldiers received a briefing from zone commander Brigadier General Luis Humberto López Portillo endorsing the use of summary executions and instructing that everyone in the military’s path be presumed a rebel. According to army captain Jesús Valles, the soldiers

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10 The Chiapas Rebellion, 21.
11 The War Against Oblivion, 20.
13 The Chiapas Rebellion, 22.
14 The War Against Oblivion, 23-24.
were advised to take no prisoners except in instances in which the press may be present to report potential atrocities. 15

By the time the military had reclaimed the city, Reuters reported 22 rebel corpses in the market place. However, the full extent of the carnage left in the military’s wake is far more extensive than this initial statistic would suggest. In addition to this early report of 22 deaths, nine bodies were found in the sewers—rebels killed in a desperate attempt to escape the Mexican army’s onslaught. Seven more young men were found dead in the market’s patio—five of whom had been shot execution-style with their hands bound behind their backs. Additionally, at least eight civilians were killed inside a local hospital, some still in their beds. In the days following the battle, an additional 77 hurriedly buried bodies were exhumed in Ocosingo. 16 However, the Mexican Defense Ministry only reported the deaths of seven soldiers, 27 civilians, and 59 rebels in the battle. 17 Local priest Father Trejo—whose parish was strafed by HUEY helicopter gunships and P-7 Pilatus fighters during the conflict—estimated 150 dead between January 1 and January 4, 1994. 18 No matter the exact number of casualties, the carnage and destruction wrought by the military was impossible to hide. Once the government had reclaimed the city, one reporter noted: “The stench of death permeates Ocosingo. The buzzards smell it and circle, looking for dead meat, while helicopters circle, looking for live meat.” 19 This graphic description of the battle’s aftermath is indicative of the role played by the Mexican military during the initial days of the conflict.

15 Ibid., 24.
16 Ibid., 24, 25.
17 The Chiapas Rebellion, 22.
18 The War Against Oblivion, 25.
19 The Chiapas Rebellion, 22.
In all, hostilities between the Mexican state and the EZLN lasted 12 days, from January 1 until January 12. Casualty estimates from the 12-day conflict vary. The National Commission for Human Rights estimated 159 deaths, including casualties on both sides and civilian deaths. The International Committee of Jurists placed the number of deaths at between 200 and 300. The Zapatistas’ estimate is much higher, reporting their own casualties at 500 dead, 300 disappeared, 370 prisoners, and 50 wounded. As evidenced by these casualty numbers, the battle for Ocosingo was not the only instance in which civilians were victimized. P-7s and HUEYs from the United States—ostensibly intended for use in the “War on Drugs”—were often employed in strafing missions against the rebels, sometimes deliberately targeting civilian populations. In a notable example of the military’s deliberate cruelty towards civilians, soldiers ransacked and terrorized the village of Ejido Morelia, looting the local store, robbing homes, and forcing the village’s 150 male inhabitants to lie face down on the local basketball court while soldiers walked on their bodies. Subjected to this treatment for an entire morning, soldiers tormented the men with belligerent threats, saying: “Today is the day we turn Morelia into an orphanage.” Eventually, three local men were separated from the group and tortured mercilessly within earshot of their tormented fellow townsmen. After being forcibly submerged underwater in a baptismal font, repeatedly electrocuted, and burnt by cigarette lighters, soldiers removed these men from the town, torturing them as they were transported from prison to prison. Eventually, their bones were found in a zopilotera (vulture pit) along with the carcasses of dead

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20 Ibid., 23.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 The War Against Oblivion, 27.
24 The Chiapas Rebellion, 23.
25 The War Against Oblivion, 29.
animals left for scavenging birds. 26 Although the brutalization of the Ejido Morelia civilian population is a uniquely vivid example of the deliberate terror inflicted on indigenous populations by the Mexican military during the 12 days of fighting between government forces and the Zapatista rebels, it is indicative of the pervasive structural violence maintaining the subjugation of indigenous populations throughout Chiapas.

The Historical Roots of the Zapatista Uprising: A Revolt 500 Years in the Making

Due to the timing of the EZLN’s initial uprising, activists and scholars often frame the Zapatistas’ actions as a direct, deliberate response to the implementation of NAFTA. While there is not doubt that the EZLN selected January 1, 1994 for its symbolic importance, the Zapatista movement is far more expansive and deeply rooted than any single event. In many ways, the Zapatistas’ 1994 uprising can be seen as the culmination of nearly 500 years of oppression endured by indigenous peoples in Chiapas—from the initial Spanish invasion onwards. However, Zapatismo is also very much a product of the modern world—a response to the passage of NAFTA and the wider domination of neoliberal capitalist globalization. Accordingly, the EZLN is, at once, a manifestation of centuries of indigenous resistance to subjugation, and a product of modern circumstances—a force initiating a wider global struggle against the hegemony of post-Cold War neoliberalism. Zapatismo, as a diverse, heterodox, and sometimes contradictory and poorly defined ideology is perhaps best summarized by Zapatista spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos: “When we made our appearance on the first of January of 1994, we had only vaguely defined what Zapatismo is. It was a very vague initial synthesis, a mixture of patriotic values, of the historical inheritance of what was the clandestine Left in Mexico in the decade of the 1960s, of elements of indigenous culture, of military elements of

26 The Chiapas Rebellion, 29-30.
Mexican history, of what were the guerrilla movements of Central and South America, of national liberation movements.”  

In order to better understand this “initial synthesis”, it is first necessary to examine the history of Chiapas, Mexico.

As a region very much distinct from Mexico’s other 30 states, Chiapas has a long history of indigenous subjugation and resistance. The racial polarization of the state stands in stark contrast to most regions of the country, directly contradicting the dominant Mexican national myth of mestizaje as the Mexican national identity, the result of a unified Spanish and indigenous heritage. With a centuries-long history of stratification along racial lines, indigenous peoples constitute approximately 30 percent of Chiapas’ inhabitants. In this region, the non-indigenous population maintains a higher social and class standing, controlling the vast majority of land in the form of extensive estates and sprawling cattle ranches. The dominant position of non-indigenous peoples and the underlying conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous populations in the region dates back to the initial Spanish invasion and is maintained by intense, pervasive, and omnipresent violence protecting the privilege and class standing of the local non-indigenous elite.

Discussing the EZLN’s January 1, 1994 uprising, author John Ross concludes that “[r]acism has been the subtext of this rebellion for more than 500 years now.” Of course, the Zapatistas’ was not the first rebellion in Chiapan history. The first instances of native resistance to outside subjugation date back to the beginnings of Spanish incursions in the 16th century. The indigenous population of Chiapas initially rebelled against Spanish rule in 1532 and 1534, only

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28 The Chiapas Rebellion, 1.
29 The War Against Oblivion, 18.
to be defeated by the Spanish military’s superior strength of arms.\textsuperscript{30} In 1712, indigenous Chiapanecos launched a defiant, well-coordinated uprising against Spanish rule in the region, targeting the power of the Catholic Church as an extension of Spanish imperial control. After a young indigenous woman reported receiving a visit from the Virgin Mary, an extensive religious following emerged in honor of the Virgin. In an openly belligerent and radical statement indicative of the relationship between the Spanish monarchy and the Catholic Church during the colonial era, followers of the Virgin declared: “Neither God nor the King exist any longer.”\textsuperscript{31} Rebelling against the Church and Spanish imperial control, the indigenous population loyal to the Virgin Mary organized an army of 5,000 soldiers. For three months, “The Soldiers of the Virgin” engaged in fierce combat with Spanish forces, sacking churches and Spanish estates, killing many settlers, including five Dominican curates.\textsuperscript{32} In the 1860s, the native population of Chiapas again rebelled against outside authority, this time in the form of the Mexican national government. In 1869, 4,000 indigenous fighters briefly besieged the state capital of San Cristóbal de las Casas\textsuperscript{33}—one of the primary targets of the EZLN’s uprising 125 years later. Despite its transformative impact as the defining event in Mexican history, the Mexican Revolution did little to alleviate the plight of indigenous Chiapanecos. During this time period, the efforts of local mapaches (counterrevolutionary ranchers and estate owners) were able to effectively ward off any threats to the Chiapan power structure. When mapache leader Tiburcio Fernández Ruiz became governor of Chiapas in 1920, the traditional hierarchal character of Chiapan society was only reaffirmed.\textsuperscript{34} Opposed to any significant agrarian reform threatening

\textsuperscript{30} The Chiapas Rebellion, 1.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 2.  
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 5.
the landholdings of the local elite, Ruiz allowed landowners to maintain private estates as large as 8,000 hectares (31 square miles). However, even this maximum limit was not enforced by the state. In 1930, 29 estates in Chiapas each encompassed more than 10,000 hectares. The continued inequitable division of land in Chiapas left the indigenous population without access to arable, productive land, resulting in conditions of perpetual servitude and debt peonage. It would not be until the 1930s that indigenous Chiapanecos first experienced the impact of the Mexican Revolution’s promised reforms.

Committed to implementing populist reforms on a nationwide scale, the Lázaro Cárdenas presidency (1934-40) provided the impetus for an agrarian reform allowing rural communities to file appeals for collective ownership of the land on which they lived and worked. As a result, indigenous populations in Chiapas were able to lay claim to land that would form the basis of ejidos—villages organized around communally controlled and maintained plots of land. In all, 252,882 hectares of land were transferred to ejido control in Chiapas between 1933 and 1940. However, despite the apparent quantifiable success of agrarian reform in Chiapas, the local power structure remained largely unchanged as elite landowners were able to maintain their estates virtually intact. Although indigenous communities took control of hundreds of thousands of hectares of land, this land was distinctly inferior, as cattle ranches and existing estates were hardly altered. In 1930, landholdings of greater than 5,000 hectares made up 29 percent of privately owned land in Chiapas. By 1940, these properties still constituted 27 percent of Chiapan agricultural land. Anthropologist Luis Hernández Navarro provides a telling depiction of the inadequacies of the agrarian reform campaign, describing a system in which

35 Ibid.
36 ¡Zapata lives!: Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico, 99.
37 The Chiapas Rebellion, 6.
“land petitioners were sent off on an adventure to colonize the forest.” Due to the infertility of forest land, the situation of Chiapas’ indigenous communities remained largely unchanged. By 1994, little had improved since the end of the Cárdenas presidency in 1940. On the eve of the Zapatista’s uprising, greater than 30 percent of the total population of Chiapas remained illiterate. In mostly indigenous villages, this number reached as high as 71 percent. In the state as a whole, approximately 80 percent of the population made less than twice minimum wage in 1994. In terms of overall social indicators, Chiapas ranked at or near the bottom of the 31 Mexican states in nearly every category.

NAFTA and Article 27: Catalysts to Revolt

Given the existence of such dire conditions in Chiapas, it is not surprising that the EZLN would be able to successfully launch a wide scale insurrection reminiscent of previous indigenous struggles. However, the Zapatista uprising should not be cast as a mere reincarnation of traditional forms of resistance or an inevitable result of centuries of accumulated grievances. Zapatismo is, in many ways, a uniquely modern phenomenon—a response to the hegemony of post-Cold War neoliberal capitalism in Mexico and throughout the world. This is most clearly illustrated by the Zapatistas’ militant opposition to NAFTA. Aside from broader ideological concerns, the Mexican government’s implementation of specific policies provided a direct material impetus to revolt. In preparation for the passage of NAFTA, in an attempt to provide more favorable conditions for capital investment in the rural economy, the Mexican government drastically altered Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution—the provision establishing the legal basis for the formation of collective ejido landholdings. The effective negation of Article 27

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39 The Chiapas Rebellion, 18.
40 Ibid., 17.
presented enormous challenges to the already impoverished indigenous populations of Chiapas. Forced into the newly formalized agriculture market without the requisite capital to compete, already impoverished indigenous communities in Chiapas faced an enormous disadvantage compared to the wealthy owners of large estates and cattle ranches who were poised to take advantage of the abrupt shift in agrarian policy. As a result, ejidos became increasingly vulnerable to incursions by large estate owners who could take advantage of re-divided communal plots. 41

Additionally, the revision of Article 27 had a profound psychological impact on Chiapan indigenous communities. With the cessation of land distribution and the newly permitted sale of ejido land, anyone with an outstanding claim to communal property would no longer have the hope of acquiring land. During the period prior to the alteration of Article 27, although appeals to the government had often been unsuccessful and generally remained shelved for years, the existence of a formal legal process through which land could be acquired had provided a strong psychological barrier to revolt. With this legal outlet removed and the impending threat of local agriculture being rendered null altogether as a result of cheap food imports from the United States, the Zapatistas were provided with a powerful catalyst to revolt. Viewed in this light, the Zapatistas’ famous slogan: “NAFTA is death!” is not merely a hyperbolic battle cry, but reflects the position of a marginalized and oppressed group, facing the cruel effects of a policy over which they had no power or control. On the first day of the uprising, Subcomandante Marcos eloquently summarized the destructive nature of NAFTA as a motivating factor behind the rebellion, saying: “Today the North American Free Trade Agreement begins, which is nothing more than a death sentence to the Indigenous ethnicities of Mexico, who are perfectly

41 Ibid.
dispensable in the modernization program of Salinas de Gortari. Then the compañeros decided to rise up on that same day to respond to the decree of death that the Free Trade Agreement gives them, with the decree of life that is given by rising up in arms….” 42 So, while the EZLN’s January 1, 1994 uprising was certainly rooted in centuries of oppression and resistance, the negation of Article 27 as a viable means of acquiring land, together with the threat posed to already impoverished communities by the implementation of NAFTA, provided the necessary and immediate impetus to successfully launch an armed uprising in Chiapas.

**Zapatismo: Local, National(ist), and Global Impact**

In addition to its synthesis of old and new features as a product of resistance to embedded historical structures of oppression and recent policy shifts, the EZLN’s uprising was also unique in the diversity and scope of its impact, combining a focus on local, national(ist), and global issues. In an attempt to downplay the significance of the EZLN insurgency, the Mexican government initially cast the uprising as a specifically local issue, with no impact outside of Chiapas. This ploy, designed to assure potential foreign investors of the stability of the Mexican state, actually benefited the Zapatistas. Because the Mexican national government remained intent on downplaying the significance of the rebellion, they were unable to carry out the type of protracted scorched earth counterinsurgency campaign employed against guerrilla forces in Central America during the 1980s for fear of alarming potential international business partners. Consequently, the Zapatistas were able to maintain a visible presence and international platform relatively unencumbered by the repressive arm of the Mexican state—in large part due to the media savvy of Subcomandante Marcos.

42 “Testimonies of the First Day” (originally appearing in _La Jornada_, January 19, 1994) in _The Zapatista Reader_, 216.
In the immediate aftermath of the Zapatistas’ capture of San Cristóbal on January 1, 1994, Marcos initially emphasized the local racial dynamic contributing to the uprising, describing the cruelty with which the city’s inhabitants treated the indigenous population, and informing the media: “Today the white people of San Cristóbal respect the Indians because they have guns in their hands.” In an interview with *La Jornada*, Marcos expanded upon the Zapatistas’ motivations, stressing the EZLN’s desire to seek “justice where there is now not even minimum subsistence—such as in the whole state of Chiapas”, and defining the EZLN’s “immediate objective” as the implementation of new agricultural laws in the “liberated zones”, encouraging the *campesinos* to “organize themselves, taking land, respecting small rural property and working in collectives, ignoring all the debts with the government.” However, despite this early focus on local issues, in official communiqués the EZLN openly asserted the national scope of its struggle, even declaring its intention to “advance to the capital of the country, overcoming the Mexican federal Army.” Although the Zapatistas were surely aware that such aggressive action would be a practical impossibility given the rebel troops’ limited numbers and poor weaponry, the symbolic significance of such a statement is critical to understanding the aims of the EZLN. From the onset of the uprising, the EZLN addressed the *mal gobierno* (bad government) in Mexico City as its primary focus. In the same interview with *La Jornada* following the Zapatistas’ capture of San Cristóbal, Marcos emphasized the national focus of the Zapatistas’ resistance movement, calling for a “struggle for a truly free and democratic government in Mexico that can fulfill the aspirations of each and every person.”

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43 *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 3.
44 *The War Against Oblivion*, 21.
45 “Testimonies of the First Day” in *The Zapatista Reader*, 213.
46 “First Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle,” (January 1, 1994) in *The Zapatista Reader*, 220.
47 “Testimonies of the First Day” in *The Zapatista Reader*, 211.
moving beyond any narrow resistance confined to the specific grievances of indigenous Chiapenecos, this statement indicates a profound commitment to a wider national movement that would challenge the entrenched national power structure—not only local systems of inequality.

Many of the Zapatistas’ most prominent statements indicate a focus on a broad struggle that is not only national in scope, but also deeply nationalist. The opening sentence of the Zapatistas’ declaration of war, the “First Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle”, casts the EZLN’s uprising as a continuation of Mexico’s historical struggle for independence, asserting:

“We are a product of 500 years of struggle: first against slavery, then during the War of Independence against Spain led by insurgents, then to avoid being absorbed by North American imperialism, then to promulgate our constitution and expel the French empire from our soil.”

Directly targeting the Institutional Revolutionary Party’s (PRI) almost seventy-year-long rule and the corrupt “one-party system” led by then-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the “maximum and illegitimate federal executive” according to the Zapatistas, the EZLN intended to continue its fight “until the basic demands of our people have been met by forming a government of our country that is free and democratic.”

In later statements, the Zapatistas’ nationalist outlook is even more pronounced. In the “Second Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle”, the rebels clearly affirm their national platform, declaring that “[w]e are Mexicans” and asserting: “There will be no real solutions in Chiapas until the situation in Mexico as a whole is resolved.” The primary theme of the “Third Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle” is a focus on national liberation. In vividly patriotic language, the Zapatistas describe the “shame of seeing the national colors usurped by

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49 Ibid., 219-220.
the emblem of the PRI”, openly declaring: “Our struggle is national” and calling on “all honest Mexicans…to form a national liberation movement…for the installation of a transitional government, a new constitutional body, a new Constitution, and the destruction of the party-state system.”  

In the “Fourth Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle”, the Zapatistas directly countered the Mexican government’s claims to representing the Mexican nation, portraying the government as having betrayed the country through its policies—most notably, NAFTA. The declaration asserts: “[T]he true loss of national sovereignty was concretized in secret pacts and public deals with the owners of money and foreign governments. Today, … the high officials finish selling off the wealth of the great Mexican nation and destroy the little that was left.”  

This interpretation marks a clear differentiation between the treachery of the traitorous Mexican government and the patriotic national liberation movement of the Zapatistas. While the “project of the powerful entails the total destruction of the Mexican nation, the negation of its history, [and] the sale of its sovereignty”, the Zapatistas’ project “calls for the defense of national sovereignty.”  

In each of the four Declarations, it is evident that the Zapatistas, although inspired to action by the specific conditions of Chiapas, understand their struggle as a wider national liberation movement through which not only the indigenous communities of Chiapas—but also the entire Mexican nation—might become empowered to cast off its chains of oppression.

Although the Zapatistas certainly display an intense and fervent Mexican patriotism in their writings, theirs is not a narrow nationalism focused only on Mexico at the expense of wider

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52 “Fourth Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle,” (January, 1996) in The Zapatista Reader, 243-244.
53 Ibid., 246
global struggles. In fact, the Zapatistas’ primary impact has been on a global rather than local or national scale. Far from being the “globaphobes” portrayed by the Mexican government in the early months of the uprising, the Zapatistas do not reject or deny global interconnections, but, instead, make direct use of these interconnections in order to build a larger counter-hegemonic globalization movement in opposition to the dominant globalization of transnational corporations. Subcomandante Marcos’ 1997 essay, “The Fourth World War has Begun” provides a remarkably astute, thorough analysis of neoliberal capitalism, placing the Zapatistas’ specific struggle within a wider global context. However, the Zapatistas’ struggle is not so much a battle within this “Fourth World War” as it is a product of the war’s wider effects. In much the same way as the Bolshevik Revolution emerged out of the First World War as a “conversion of the imperialist war into a [revolutionary] civil war,” the Zapatistas’ uprising has emerged as a force seeking to transform neoliberal globalization into a new, more inclusive and equitable globalization.

In conceptualizing the Fourth World War, Marcos traces its origins to the culmination of the Cold War—or Third World War. While the Cold War pitted capitalism against socialism in “varying degrees of intensity,” Marcos describes the Fourth World War as an ongoing, incessant conflict between “financial centers in theaters of war that are global in scale and with a level of intensity that is fierce and constant.” In a cruel twist of fate, the world was again re-divided in the wake of the Cold War, a process Marcos depicts as a reversion to “earlier epochs of the conquests of America, Africa, and Oceania—a strange modernity this, which progresses by

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going backward.” 56 However, this new re-division was carried out not by states, but by the institutions of global financial capitalism. In fact, neoliberal globalization entails a destruction of the formal, sovereign nation state, creating a “giant planetary hypermarket” in which “only commodities…circulate freely, not people.” 57 In Marcos’ interpretation, “[g]lobalization is merely the totalitarian extension of the logic of financial markets to all aspects of life.” 58 This globalization of financial markets creates “an excess of human beings who are useless in terms of the new world order because they do not produce, do not consume, and do not borrow from banks. In short, human beings who are disposable.” 59 In the context of neoliberal globalization, the indigenous inhabitants of Chiapas constituted an easily disposable surplus population. As a result, the EZLN’s uprising could not be aimed merely against local structures of ethnic and class oppression or directed specifically towards the national PRI dictatorship, but required a wider global struggle against neoliberal capitalist globalization.

**Zapatismo: Revolutionary in Form, Reformist in Essence**

In addition to its combination of old and new features, as well as its unified local, national(ist), and global focus of action, the movement sparked by the Zapatistas in 1994 constitutes a heterodox amalgamation of revolutionary and reformist elements. As a struggle initiated in the wake of the destruction of Soviet and Eastern European socialism, in an era in which any alternative to the hegemony of global capital could be dismissed as a remnant of a failed system, the EZLN’s uprising undoubtedly had a profound—even revolutionary—impact on a global scale as an affirmation of the continued possibility of active confrontation with global structures of power. After January 1, 1994, the Zapatistas’ famous slogan, “¡Ya basta!”

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 275.
58 Ibid., 273.
59 Ibid., 278.
(enough is enough) quickly became the battle cry of a newly invigorated international Left, emboldened by the Zapatistas’ uprising. In this way, through the example of its own struggle, the EZLN resurrected the possibility of effective resistance to the seemingly inevitable advance of neoliberal globalization. However, simply sparking a shift in consciousness is not a revolutionary action in itself. Although insurrectionary guerrilla warfare is, on its face, a revolutionary form of resistance, the EZLN, unlike traditional guerrilla movements, does not offer revolutionary solutions.

The most notable divergence between the EZLN and Latin American guerrilla forces in the Marxist-Leninist tradition is found in their conflicting takes on the question of state power. Unlike other post-Cuban Revolution guerrilla movements, the Zapatistas did not launch their 1994 uprising with the aim of achieving the revolutionary transformation of society through the destruction of the bourgeois state. Formed in the early 1980s as the military arm of the Mexican National Liberation Front (FLN), the EZLN was originally conceptualized as a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary armed force with the stated goal “to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, understood as a government of the workers that will stave off counterrevolution and begin the construction of socialism in Mexico,” However, this objective is nowhere present in the post-uprising ideology or actions of the Zapatistas. In place of class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Zapatistas’ works consistently emphasize a broad focus on enlivening civil society to establish more democratic forms of participation. Even in their formal declaration of war on January 1, 1994, the EZLN did not call for any revolutionary alteration of the Mexican state, but instead appealed to constitutional provisions, citing Article 39 of the Mexican

60 “First Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle,” in The Zapatista Reader, 218.
61 Quoted in Andres Oppenheimer, “Guerrillas in the Mist,” (June 17, 1996), in The Zapatista Reader, 51.
Constitution: “The people have, at all times, the inalienable right to alter or modify their form of government.” Focused on broad liberal ideals of “democracy, liberty, and justice” and a call to “national dialogue”, the Zapatistas offer little in the way of concrete radical solutions. The early demands of the EZLN constituted little more than calls for increased indigenous autonomy within the Mexican state, together with a democratization of the national political system through a broad movement for “the installation of a transitional government, a new constitutional body, a new Constitution, and the destruction of the party-state system.” Placing itself firmly within the bourgeois liberal democratic tradition, the EZLN called for the creation of a “new Magna Carta” and provided assurances that “this revolution will not end in a new class, faction of a class, or group in power. It will end in a free and democratic space for political struggle.” In this way, the EZLN clearly differentiates itself from Marxism-Leninism and its specifically Latin American Fidelista and Guevarist guerrilla incarnations.

In contrast to the staunch ideological commitment of previous revolutionary movements, the Zapatistas frame their struggle not as the advancement of any particular ideology, but as a movement designed to “build a new world. A world in which there is room for many worlds. A world capable of containing all the worlds.” Subcomandante Marcos provides a clear illustration of the difference between the EZLN and earlier guerrilla conflicts in his assertion: “We don’t want to impose our solutions by force, we want to create a democratic space. We don’t see armed struggle in the classic sense of previous guerrilla wars, that is, as the only way and the only all-powerful truth around which everything is organized. In a war, the decisive thing

63 “Second Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle,” in The Zapatista Reader, 228.
64 “Third Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle,” in The Zapatista Reader, 237.
65 “Fourth Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle,” in The Zapatista Reader, 249.
66 “Second Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle,” in The Zapatista Reader, 226.
67 Subcomandante Marcos, “The Fourth World War has Begun,” in The Zapatista Reader, 284.
is not the military confrontation but the politics at stake in the confrontation. We didn’t go to war to kill or be killed. We went to war in order to be heard.” 68 However, the EZLN and traditional Marxist-Leninist guerrilla movements do not differ so much in their emphasis on either specifically military or political considerations, but in the character of their politics. While the forms of armed struggle conceptualized by the likes of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara are designed to overthrow the state in order to achieve a revolutionary transformation of society, the Zapatistas seek a social and political renovation of the existing order based in the mobilization of a broadly conceptualized national and global civil society.

The Zapatistas’ combination of revolutionary methods and inclusive reformist solutions constitutes, at once, the movement’s greatest weakness and greatest strength. Their calls for an empowered and enlivened civil society—both domestically and globally—and overarching emphasis on abstract concepts of “democracy, liberty, and justice” allow the Zapatistas to appeal to broad sections of the global population that would likely react hostilely to any revolutionary Marxist-Leninist movement intent on seizing state power. With an aesthetically pleasing combination of revolutionary flare and a call for the formation of an all-encompassing, pluralistic global movement, the Zapatistas have been able to maintain an international appeal and presence far beyond their relatively limited size and power. However, in terms of concrete impact, this widespread, but divergent and poorly harnessed mobilization of a broadly conceptualized civil society can be politically debilitating. Jorge Mancillas provides a particularly telling illustration of this phenomenon, describing a global political climate in which:

“Revolutionaries are rapidly withering away and seen more and more as unwanted relics of a failed social evolutionary experiment. And ‘rebels’ are stepping into that vacuum. While for a century and a half the Left was primarily a current of various political

organizations that fought for one or another version of socialism, it is now becoming primarily a collection of protest groups and individuals: opponents of neoliberalism and economic globalization..., groups and individuals whose goal is the humanization of capitalism, rather than its overthrow, with an amorphous and undefined ‘civil society’ at the lead. Gone is the concept of classes and class struggle. Groups are increasingly critical of political parties and the view that it is necessary to seize the institutions of political power to effectively and sustainably make economic and political change.”

As a “political force which does not aspire to take power [...] a force which is not a political party”, the Zapatistas have been notably successful in promoting and forwarding a message of political participation and popular empowerment. However, the EZLN’s rejection of revolutionary class politics severely limits its ability to effectively challenge dominant structures of power—either locally, nationally, or globally—in any meaningful fashion outside of the ideological realm.

Conclusion

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation’s lasting impact and international renown is not traceable to its political power or the viability of any unique ideology. Instead, Zapatismo gains its widespread appeal from its complex, at times contradictory combination of various ideologies and methods, drawing from the old and the new, focusing at once on the local, the national(ist), and the global, and combining both revolutionary and reformist features. As a result, the Zapatistas have been able to gain support from broad sectors of the international community in a continuing struggle—a struggle with deep historical roots of resistance to oppression, materially fostered at times by the specificity of events and policies, and ultimately moderated by the limitations of its own political constraints. In the words of Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, the founder of Mexico’s human rights movement and “a pillar of the Mexican Left”:

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70 “Fourth Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle,” in The Zapatista Reader, 248.
“Hope…the Zapatistas represent hope, and we must preserve hope at all costs.” 71 The preservation of hope in an era of hopelessness is the enduring legacy of the Zapatistas.

Bibliography


