

Reimagining The Possible: Zapatista Discourse And The Problematics Of Rights

Lisa Poggiali

MA in the Social Anthropology of Development, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
(London, UK)

Abstract: In the following paper I analyze the discourse of the modern Zapatistas, a revolutionary global social movement that locates itself geographically in Chiapas, Mexico. I argue that the Zapatistas have represented themselves to the Mexican and global public by employing two different strategies. These strategies are 1) using violent force to shock the public and 2) issuing poetic and sometimes opaque statements in the form of communiqués. I contend that these communiqués were successful in attracting and holding the attention of the national and international public because they 1) reinterpreted and rehistoricized images of the ‘traditional indigenous peasant’ and 2) entered into a modern, legal discourse of ‘rights’. I focus particularly on how the Zapatistas mobilized the discourses of indigenous rights and women’s rights, and explore how their concomitant use of violence struggle and their privileging a language of rights has opened up new conceptual and political possibilities for global contemporary human rights discourse and praxis. In addition, I argue throughout for a culturally specific and historically situated analysis of Zapatista ‘rights discourse’.

Keywords: Mexico, Zapatista, indigenous, human rights

*To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’
(Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.*

Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History

*History has the cruel reality of a nightmare and the grandeur of man consists in his making
beautiful and lasting works out of the real substance of that nightmare...it consists in
transforming the nightmare into vision; in freeing ourselves from the shapeless horror of
reality – if only for an instant – by means of creation.*

Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude

*It is not necessary to conquer the world. It is sufficient with making it new. Us. Today.
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, First Declaration of La Realidad for Humanity and
Against Neoliberalism*

Introduction

It is January 1, 2004 in the small rural highland village of Oventic, about an hour’s car ride from the old colonial city of San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Oventic is located in what the Zapatistas call ‘Zapatista rebel territory’. Outside the entrance to the village, a sign reads: ‘You are in Zapatista rebel territory. Here the people command and the government obeys.’ Although Oventic is not represented on most state generated maps of Chiapas, it has a special significance in the contemporary Zapatista imagination. It was the

township where the first of five *junta de buen gobiernos* was erected in August of 2003. The *junta de buen gobiernos* are governing boards the Zapatistas have set up to rule Zapatista territory; they have declared them autonomous from the Mexican state. All Zapatista related questions and concerns, whether initiated by Zapatistas or outsiders, must pass through one of the *juntas*, which are staffed by Zapatista community members. On this particular day, the members of the *junta*, and the general population of the village of Oventic, are extremely busy. They are celebrating and commemorating the ten-year anniversary of the day the Zapatistas first made themselves known to Chiapas, the Mexican state, and the world.

The Zapatistas Make An Entrance: The Politics of Globalization

Ten years ago, on January 1, 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) donned rubber boots and facemasks and carried weapons ranging from AK-47s to symbolic rifles carved out of wood. They forcefully occupied seven municipalities in southeastern Chiapas, Mexico, including San Cristobal de las Casas, which is the former capital of the state and a present day Ladino¹ dominated, tourist friendly commercial city. The Zapatistas declared ‘Ya Basta!’², issued the First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, declared war on the Mexican government, and carved out a space in the global public imaginary.

That same day, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which had been signed in 1992 by Canadian, American, and Mexican national political leaders, went into effect. NAFTA promised to liberalize trade barriers between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. For Mexico, this meant that formerly communal land (known as *ejidos*) could be privatized in order to harvest cash crops, natural resources could be exploited, and the ‘modernization’ and ‘development’ projects that the Mexican state had begun to initiate in the 1970s throughout much of Mexico, and in the 1990s in Chiapas, could continue. In addition, NAFTA made it possible for United States agribusiness to flood the Mexican market with low quality, highly subsidized corn, inevitably driving small Mexican farmers out of business. NAFTA can be characterized by what Brecher, Costello, and Smith refer to as ‘globalization from above.’ According to them, globalization from above ‘promotes a destructive competition in which workers, communities, and entire countries are forced to cut labor, social, and environmental costs to attract mobile capital.’³ In the case of Chiapas, NAFTA had a particularly devastating effect.

Chiapas is a reserve of natural resources for the rest of Mexico. Chiapas’ oil, gas, timber, and hydroelectric power reserves provide fifty-five percent of Mexico’s electricity, twenty-one percent of Mexico’s oil production, and forty-seven percent of its natural gas production. In addition, Chiapas is the largest coffee producer in Mexico and the second largest producer of beef, corn, bananas, honey, melons, avocados, and cocoa. Despite its wealth of natural resources and base capital, however, over seventy percent of the population of Chiapas lives below the poverty line (nationwide this figure is six percent), making it the poorest state in Mexico.⁴ The ‘free trade’ stipulations that NAFTA enforced promised to make it easier for the Mexican state to extract resources indiscriminately from Chiapas. No doubt the state assumed that the mostly indigenous peasants who lived in Chiapas would be powerless to resist such a global economic force. As the Zapatistas have proven so far, however, the Mexican state was unequivocally wrong.

Who Are the Zapatistas?

For those only vaguely familiar with Latin American politics, the word *Zapatista* probably conjures up an image of the romanticized indigenous peasant, the dark skinned,

rural poor who don traditional dress and 'live off the land'. As with all romanticized notions of identity, this snapshot is mostly inaccurate. The Zapatistas do consist of indigenous Chiapan peasants; however, they also consist of refugees from other parts of Mexico, migrants who had fled war and poverty in Guatemala in the 1980s, supporters living in the Mexican diaspora, and middle-class urban intellectuals. This last category of peoples is particularly significant as the 'voice' of the Zapatistas is Subcomandante Marcos, a middle-class, university educated Ladino from Mexico City. Marcos has become famous for translating Zapatista demands and concerns into poetic and oftentimes opaque language fit for national and international eyes.⁵ He 'speaks – without fear and against all custom, from a realm of the unofficial and the personal...[he] informs as well as communicates and even converses...[he] utilizes humor and appeals to irony.'⁶ Marcos has presented an acoustic frame within which Zapatista thought and action can be heard in spaces outside of Zapatista territory. He has made it possible, and even fashionable, for others living in the global North, with backgrounds in Western intellectual thought, to declare themselves Zapatistas as well.⁷

The Zapatistas: An Imagined Community

Beginning in the early 1990s the concept of 'globalization' began to gain popularity in academic and activist circles. There was much discussion of the increasingly porous nature of national and international borders, and of the ways in which traditional barriers erected between individuals and communities had begun to erode. The Zapatista uprising played a significant role in this discussion, as their ideology and presence have crossed national and international borders in a way unlike those of any other Latin American revolutionary movement in the recent past. It is because of their ability to cross national boundaries and still retain a sense of wholeness that they constitute a uniquely formed 'imagined community'.

The term 'imagined community' was first coined by the scholar of nationalism, Benedict Anderson, in 1991. He states⁸ 'Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.' Anderson contends that all nations are 'imagined communities' as they are made up of individuals who will probably never meet each other in their lifetimes, but who each 'live the image of their communion' in their minds. Anderson proffers that the nation is always imagined as limited (with finite borders) and sovereign (gauged by the degree of freedom it has vis-a-vis other nations as dictated by Enlightenment and Revolutionary ideals).⁹

In remarking on the multiple ways in which people of different nationalities, ethnicities, economic backgrounds, and even political ideologies can in some way be a part of the totality I will call the 'imagined Zapatista community', I do not wish to gloss over the very pronounced intra-group differences present within the movement. To be sure, these differences continually shape the ways in which Zapatista politics are enacted and the ways in which the Zapatistas mobilize representations of themselves; representations that are often deployed for members within their own larger community. While there is definitely a collective consciousness about what it means to be a Zapatista, each person no doubt imagines their relationship to Zapatista discourse and to the Zapatistas as a social movement differently. This is a crucial point for a social movement that attempts to explicitly engage the global public.

Intention and Methodology

In the following pages, I will analyze how Zapatista discourse has crystallized, and how the Zapatistas have chosen to present themselves to the national and international public. I hope that through doing such an analysis one can begin to grapple with the options currently available to the Zapatistas, and to Third and Fourth World peoples engaged in or supportive of revolutionary and/or global justice movements in general. In order to trace such resistance, I will focus on the particular way in which the Zapatistas have formed their discourse, and specifically the way in which they have represented themselves to both the Mexican population and the 'global public', which, though always necessarily an open signifier, has come to be associated with international civil society, much of which is located in 'the West'.

My aim in this paper is not to discover or uncover what the Zapatistas 'really think' about their struggle and the subsequent engagement of Mexican civil society and the international community. I contend that searching for the 'true thoughts' of a particular community is nearly always a fruitless exercise, as thought processes continuously (re)formulate themselves on the shaky and always shifting terrain on which the battle between desire, meaning, and interpretation is waged.

In addition, I am less interested in the internal dissensions and disparate opinions in the Zapatista movement itself (of which there are many) than I am in how the movement attempts to represent itself as a coherent whole with a singular vision. I hope to illuminate what possibilities such a (re)presentation both affords and forecloses. Thus follows my decision to concentrate the following analysis mostly on writings publicized by those occupying prominent positions in the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN).

I will rely both on fieldwork I carried out during the period of time I was in Chiapas, from December 27th, 2003 – January 19th, 2004, and on public statements called *comunicués* issued by the Zapatistas between 1994 and 2003. Due to restrictions imposed by the *junta de buen gobierno* while I was in Chiapas, I was unable to record interviews using a tape recorder. Thus, the information I present from my fieldwork is mostly based on casual interviews and participant observation. Most of the direct quotations I use that were not publicly issued by the Zapatistas are from interviews conducted by other researchers, and I have cited them as such.

January 1, 2004: La Fiesta in Oventic Brings the Zapatista Struggle Full Circle

'Tienes un pasaporte?'¹⁰ asks a short man standing on the other side of the wrought iron gate that opens on to the Zapatista 10th anniversary celebration in Oventic. In Zapatista territory everyone must be documented. He throws my passport into a bag with hundreds of others and allows me to proceed. Once inside, the atmosphere is light and almost whimsical. A huge hill is flanked on either side with brightly colored buildings. They include a store called *Tienda Cooperativa Che Guevara*¹¹, which sells food, tapes, compact discs, and political pamphlets; a women's cooperative entitled *Mujeres por la dignidad*¹²; and a smattering of makeshift shacks that sell everything from political t-shirts to cold drinks. Displayed on the outside of one of the buildings are photos for sale that document the United State's recent invasion and occupation of Iraq. Men and women from countries in the global North chop wood and make dust fly, laying the base for what is expected to be a Zapatista media center. At the base of the hill there is a stage and a crowd of people. Approximately half of them are Zapatistas and half of them are Zapatista supporters. They stand and sit, watching the show in the afternoon sun.

The show consists of an array of performers. A man dressed in all black wears a ski cap with EZLN written on it in red. He parades around the stage on stilts, trying relentlessly to lure onlookers into a dance. Most of them scream, giggle, and run away. A piñata breaks and children giddily run after the candy, while journalists and other onlookers snap their cameras furiously. As the sun slips below the hills, *campesino* men sing songs in Spanish. They are about the Bolivian mineworkers' struggle, Che Guevara, and Emiliano Zapata and the Mexican Revolution. All performances take place before a backdrop of three large banners that cover the back of the stage. One reads 'red Zapatista en movimiento por la liberacion nacional'¹³, the next says EZLN, and the third is the Mexican flag. As I will show, images and symbols which point to the tension between nationalist pride on the one hand and a politics that is antagonistic towards the Mexican state, on the other, play a significant role in Zapatista discourse.

'Estas aqui para la fiesta?'¹⁴ asks a man standing nearby. He wears dusty black jeans, a plaid shirt, and a red bandana that covers the lower half of his face. Donning a mask in public is a signature of the Zapatistas. It is an act of solidarity that conceals distinctions based on ethnicity, gender, and social class, and emphasizes a single community with common goals. It is worn to draw attention to the Mexican state's attempt to silence Zapatista voices at the same time that it lends a powerful potency to these voices at the moment of their articulation: the mask enables the voices to take center stage. These voices make apparent what should be, but is not, obvious – that the seemingly unmasked Mexican state is 'the most masked entity of all possible beings to have ever crossed the threshold of the human imagination.'¹⁵ The mask presences a homogeneous image to distract from a mass of disparate images. It allows itself to fade into the background, making way for the potency of the voice. In this way, the Zapatistas' use of the mask is indicative of what Michael Taussig¹⁶ has described as the 'skilled revelation of skilled concealment'. The Zapatistas utilize the dialectical image of the mask, which is meant to conceal, to reveal themselves and their struggle to the public.

As is the case with this *fiesta*, every public gathering for the Zapatistas is a statement of (re)presentation. The peoples who attend, the mood that is created, the outfits that are worn, the activities that are engaged in, and the words that are uttered, when taken together, form a composite picture of the character of the Zapatista struggle at that space and time. In many ways, the public gatherings offer a platform for the next stage in the struggle. Every public gathering, in other words, further cements the Zapatistas as 'a political movement that has transformed the notion of the political. It garners energy from masquerade...'¹⁷ The scene created by Marcos and the Zapatista high command on Sunday, March 11, 2001 provides a perfect example. This gathering was the culmination of a march that began in Chiapas and traveled to Mexico City, the aim of which was to garner the Mexican public's support for indigenous rights. The caravan entered Mexico City by way of the Avenue 20 de Noviembre, the road that commemorates the Mexican Revolution. Before a crowd of over 100,000 supporters, Marcos stood in the middle of the main plaza, directly in front of where the President of the Republic gives the traditional 'shout of independence'. The Zapatista high command turned their backs towards the balcony of the National Palace, the most significant political space in all of Mexico.¹⁸ This was a theatrical enactment of the Zapatistas' continued refusal to concede to Vicente Fox and his lack of concern for indigenous peoples.

Every Zapatista public gathering is partly a masquerade. The gathering on the 10th anniversary, however, was also a celebration. Hence, the rhetorical question asked by the

man inside the gate: ‘Estas aqui para la fiesta?’ It was presented more as a statement than a question, as if the notion that someone could have been there for something other than the party would have been unthinkable. As Octavio Paz¹⁹ elucidates, celebrations in Mexico have a special significance:

A fiesta is more than a date or anniversary. It does not celebrate an event: it reproduces it. Chronometric time is destroyed and the eternal present – for a brief but immeasurable period – is reinstated. The fiesta becomes the creator of time; repetition becomes conception. The golden age returns.

The occurrence of a *fiesta* points to the reproduction of a specific event in the historical record. The 10th anniversary *fiesta* placed contemporary Zapatismo firmly on the historical map; it lent historical weight to the date January 1, 1994, a weight it did not previously hold. Walter Benjamin²⁰ contends that ‘In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.’ The *fiesta* in Oventic represents such an event in that it historicizes January 1, 1994 not as the day that NAFTA went into effect, but as the day when the opposition to the forces that made NAFTA possible first made itself known.

In thinking about the Zapatista 10th anniversary celebration in the terms that Paz has outlined it is imperative to make the distinction between historical *reproduction* and historical *production*. The following question must be asked: how much of the *fiesta* was spent repeating that which had already happened, and how much was spent creating a vision of the possibility of a new future, separate and distinct from the past? And, equally as important, was the event the Zapatistas were reproducing the formal commencement of the uprising on January 1, 1994, or the struggle of the original Zapatistas in the Mexican Revolution nearly a century earlier? While the first question is, at this juncture, unanswerable, the answer to the second appears to be ‘both’. The *fiesta* did reproduce the two central themes articulated by the Zapatistas when they first presented themselves to the public in January 1994. These themes are 1) (re)emphasis on the importance of an indigenous past and 2) entrance into a discourse of rights and legality that would garner support from national and international civil society. In order to articulate the idea of an indigenous past, the Zapatistas also had to situate themselves firmly in Mexican history. They did this through using the words, image, and spirit of the Mexican Revolution.

January 1, 1994: Past and Future, Fire and Word

The Zapatista’s first appearance on the public stage on January 1, 1994 came as a surprise. Even in Chiapas, where the seeds of the rebellion had been growing for ten years, neither the general population nor the Mexican government was expecting such a display. In the matter of a few hours, the Zapatistas took over seven municipalities in Chiapas. When the Zapatistas, carrying AK-47s and weapons carved out of wood, presented themselves to the world, they were attempting to change the historical record. They were calling on the Mexican people and the people of the world to ‘seize hold of a memory as it flash[ed] up at a moment of danger.’²¹ In their case, the memory was of Emiliano Zapata and the peasants who fought for agrarian reform in the Mexican Revolution of 1911. The peasants were fighting to regain control of their land from wealthy Ladinos. They were fighting, according to Tzotzil peasants recounting their history, to ‘stop [sic] being crushed’.²² The leader of the peasant agrarian reform movement, Emiliano Zapata, was assassinated by the Mexican government in 1919, and his legacy in much contemporary state and academic discourse has

been the legislation his movement is said to have helped pass. This legislation is Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which ‘became the framework for the redistribution of land that would appease the campesinos and stem more civil war.’²³ The text of the legislation reads as such:

*The nation shall at all times have the right to establish regulations for private property which the public interest may dictate, such as those regulating the use of natural resources for conservation purposes or ensuring a more equitable distribution of public wealth. With this end in view, the necessary measure shall be taken to break up the large estates.*²⁴

It is true that the establishment of *ejidos*, or communal lands, was seen by the peasants as one of the major successes of the Mexican Revolution. I contend, though, that this is less an indigenous nod to legal positivism (i.e., the very existence of the legislation as positive) than what the legislation represented that was important in the collective peasant conscience. As Paz²⁵ has noted:

The [original] Zapatista movement attempted to rectify the history of Mexico and the very meaning of [Mexico’s] existence as a nation...the Zapatistas did not conceive of Mexico as a future to be realized but as a return to origins...they affirmed that any political construction, if it is to be truly productive, must derive from the most ancient, stable and lasting part of our national being: the indigenous past.

The significance of the Revolution lies not solely in its legislative outcome, but also in its return to a time when the state did not *have* legal jurisdiction over the state of Chiapas. The modern Zapatistas took on the name of the peasant group from the Mexican Revolution; they burst onto the scene on the same day that NAFTA, which was expected to solidify the Mexican state’s plan to wrest land away from the Indians, was to go into effect. Significantly, the uprising took place only two years after the same article that created the *ejidos* rescinded communal control of them. The reformation of Article 27, under President Salinas de Gortari, abolished the previous system of land distribution and declared the *ejidos* eligible to be bought and sold.²⁶ The modern Zapatistas, then, used force both to call attention to the recent legal assault on indigenous peasants and to bring back the past, a past when the Mexican state did not have control over indigenous peasant lives. In addition, the Zapatistas succeeded in reinscribing the past with new meaning – they placed a new version of the Revolution on the written historical map, a version which had formerly been confined to oral histories. As Paz²⁷ states: ‘by means of the Revolution the Mexican people found itself, located itself in its own past and substance.’ The Zapatistas were invested in calling on the Mexican people to find itself once more, this time, perhaps, in a different light.

Reinventing the Past to Look Towards the Future

Significantly, the Zapatistas succeeded in changing the way in which, they, as a group, were conceptualized. They began to identify themselves not as *peasants*, but as *indigenous peoples*. In other words, the Zapatistas shifted the terms of debate from an identity politics of *class* to an identity politics of *ethnicity*. In a communiqué issued in March of 1994²⁸, the Clandestine Revolutionary Indian Committee-General Command of the EZLN (CCRI-CG) documented the problems that had incited the Zapatista armed uprising. Among those problems they included ‘intolerable injustices and violations of our human rights as indigenous peoples and impoverished peasants’²⁹ and the fact that ‘the constitutional laws have not been fulfilled by those who govern the country...they make us indigenous and

peasants pay for the littlest mistake...'³⁰ In the early years of the uprising, then, Zapatista discourse specified *peasants* as separate from but equally as important to *indigenous peoples*. By 1996, however, Zapatista discourse had completely erased any mention of the word *peasants* from its communiqués, and used the terms *indigenous* or *Indian* in all instances. A communiqué issued by the CCRI-CG on January 18, 1996, for instance, starts out: 'First: The rising up in arms of an army of indigenous was necessary.'³¹ It then goes on to mention the word *indigenous* thirteen times in less than one page.

The rhetorical shift from *peasant* to *indigenous* did not subsume economic concerns to ethnic or cultural ones. In other words, even after the shift, the Zapatistas still continued to make explicit references to the poverty prevalent in indigenous communities. Rather, I suggest that the Zapatistas shifted their rhetorical strategy in order to present a particular image of the Zapatista figure, and thus attract a particular audience – international civil society. By switching to a discourse of *indigenous*, the Zapatistas could mobilize the romanticized image of the ethnic Other and at the same time enter into a discourse of rights and law that they knew international civil society would both understand and respect.

In both the world of human rights law and in the minds of the humanitarian worker, the word *indigenous* carries a connotation that *peasant* does not. Indeed, the conceptual shift occurred at the same moment that the EZLN began addressing itself to the national and international press and the peoples and governments of the world. Additionally, this shift allowed the Zapatistas to expose the role that racism played in the relationship between the Mexican state and the population of Chiapas (as well as the Ladino and European populations in Chiapas itself). The Zapatistas were not only *re-presenting* history, but also *redefining* it. Collier³² recounts:

Before neoliberalism, indigenous groups represented themselves as peasants because most national programs directed to the countryside were for peasants, not for Indians...But with economic restructuring, land became more important to economic planners as a market commodity and peasants became more important as a mobile and increasingly transnational labor force. The government thus decided it no longer needed to fund the programs that supported peasants. As resources for rural support dried up, indigenous people found little basis for continuing to represent themselves as peasants rather than to protagonize themselves as distinct and worthy in their own right.

The Zapatistas were able to grapple with the current politico-economic reality in the state of Chiapas by reinscribing the past – by recreating the Zapatistas of the Mexican Revolution as *indigenous* peasants.

The Zapatistas pushed this reformulation of history even further. As Collier³³ has shown, the people of Chiapas did not have a particular attachment to Emiliano Zapata or *Zapatismo* prior to the articulation of the contemporary Zapatista struggle. Rather, most people in Chiapas came to know about and relate to the original Zapatistas gradually, as the region as a whole became more politicized. After the 1968 student protests in Mexico City were violently crushed by the Mexican government, many activists fanned out into the countryside to educate and activate rural *campesinos*. Chiapas, with the largest population of peasant farmers, was one of their major targets. Most of the original members of the EZLN, in fact, had been part of this movement to politicize the countryside.³⁴ It is not surprising, then, that twenty years later the connection between early 20th century peasant struggle and turn of the 21st century indigenous struggle had been crystallized by those who had been interested in the discourse of the original Zapatistas. Indeed, in the Revolutionary Agrarian

Law, issued in 1993, the EZLN³⁵ states: “After Emiliano Zapata...the EZLN takes up the just struggle of rural Mexico for land and liberty.” The law goes on to list sixteen different stipulations, including how land will be redistributed, who gets preference in this distribution process (“poor landless peasants and farm workers”), and how environmental and social quandaries will be taken into consideration. In a communiqué issued in March, 1994 the CCRI-CG of the EZLN³⁶ asserts as one of its thirty-four demands: “Article 27 of the Magna Carta [the federal Constitution] must respect the original spirit of Emiliano Zapata: the land is for the indigenous and the peasants who work it, not for big landlords.” In the Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, the EZLN³⁷ even reprints the original manifesto written by Emiliano Zapata, which was originally written in Nahuatl, a language most people in Chiapas are unfamiliar with. The EZLN, then, looks towards the spirit of Emiliano Zapata’s past struggle, providing a historical context for their demands that, as Collier³⁸ mentioned, did not previously exist in Chiapan peasant discourses.

The Significance of the Mexican Revolution

Much present-day discussion about the Mexican Revolution in Chiapas takes the form of *platicas*, where ‘old men and women tell [sic] what they remember to their juniors...to fortify their community’s own sense of its history and consensual identity.’³⁹ The illiterate peasants, Womack⁴⁰ says, provide the true version of the Revolution for the responsible historian in that:

they embrace the Revolution in all the geographic stages of the state, and in all the phases of the movement, from start to finish...the illiterates are the only ones who show concern to keep a complete story of the globality of the revolutionary movement, in space and time.

It was during the time period of the Revolution where peasants ‘decided not to be either *baldios* [squatters reduced to debt peonage] or servants and day laborers.’⁴¹ In their narratives, the peasants make no reference to laws or rights; they make no mention of Article 27. Article 27 is the language of the cities, of the state. In the villages of Chiapas, the Revolution signifies the time when the people ‘stopped being crushed.’⁴² They stopped being crushed because they crushed back.

20 y 10: El Fuego y La Palabra¹

The popular narrative among Chiapan peasants is that the Mexican Revolution of 1911 began when the resources of ‘the word’ were exhausted. Violence was and still is viewed as a natural outgrowth of this exhaustion.⁴³ On the surface, one can think of the force -- the fire -- of the Zapatistas as the initial violence of the uprising, an uprising that began in the spirit of Emiliano Zapata and the original Zapatistas. This concurs with a portion of the rallying cry of the 10th anniversary celebration: *20 y 10, el fuego y la palabra.*⁴⁴ In this statement *20* refers to the number of years previous the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was formed in the Lacandon Jungle. *10* refers to the year the uprising began and the year in which the Zapatistas issued the first communiqué. *El fuego* (the fire) can be equated with force, and points to the violent origins of the uprising. *La palabra* (the word) can be equated with image, and points to the words of the numerous communiqués issued by the Zapatistas which reinscribe and rearticulate the past as well as offer a vision for

the future. In a single line, the Zapatistas managed to merge what Nietzsche has termed the Dionysian force with the Apollonian image. The Zapatistas have, to a certain extent, disrupted the presumption that fire and word, force and image, violence and law are separate. Although they decided initially to employ violent tactics, over the course of the 10-year uprising the Zapatistas have gradually *transformed* the word into a weapon⁴⁵. Indeed, one of Subcomandante Marcos' collections of recent writings is entitled *Our Word Is Our Weapon*. It is to the power of the word in Zapatista discourse that my discussion will now turn.

The Zapatista Comunicués and the Power of the Word

As I have mentioned, one of the primary trademarks of the Zapatista struggle has been the poetic, sometimes opaque language used by the EZLN, and particularly by the primary spokesperson for the movement, Subcomandante Marcos. Almost all of the written text from the Zapatistas themselves travels in the form of comunicués. These are generally first sent out to the Mexican newspapers *La Jornada*, *Proceso*, *El Financiero*, and *Tiempo*, and subsequently distributed throughout the national and international press, as well as by way of the Internet.

The comunicués are a complement to the mask. Like it, they obscure all the differences within the Zapatistas – differences of ethnic background, gender, economic standing, opinion – and render them as one voice, an imagined community. Through the comunicués, the Zapatistas become a collective whole. In addition, the comunicués presence the style, the poetry, the power of language itself, just as much as the information and demands contained in the words themselves. The written style of the comunicués is undoubtedly in part what has made the Zapatistas so intriguing to the so-called global public. The Zapatistas garner international support, then, both by playing off an Orientalist notion of the 'traditional indigenous peasant' and by using the modern language of 'rights'.

Indeed, the First Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle⁴⁶, the document distributed by the Zapatistas on the first day of the uprising (January 1, 1994) was addressed to 'the people of Mexico' and 'Mexican Brothers'. It asserted that: 'We are a product of 500 years of struggle.' It makes a nostalgic reference to the past and mentions a desire to bring the Golden Age into the present. The First Declaration also makes it clear that, as the addressee makes apparent, the Zapatista movement started out as a *national* one; the language of the first comunicués attempted to appeal to the people of Mexico in order to transform Mexican society. The comunicués states: 'We are the heirs of those who truly forged our nationality.' The Zapatistas continue to think of themselves as an integral part of Mexican society today. The fact that the Mexican flag was one of three items displayed as the backdrop to the performance stage at the 10-year anniversary celebration illustrates this point. Thus, the Zapatistas were not a group that attempted to separate from Mexico, nor are they today. They construct themselves as a nationalist movement; this supports their contention that they have had and continue to have a connection to Mexican land.

In addition to referencing the Zapatistas' (arguably imaginary) connection to an indigenous past, the First Declaration also makes a clear appeal to a discourse of rights and law, referencing an epistemology that most people in Chiapas, and especially indigenous peasants, are both unfamiliar with and contemptuous towards. In Chiapas, the law has more often been deployed by the state as a tool of violence than it has been a means of protection for indigenous communities. In the aforementioned comunicués, the Zapatistas state that they resort to the Mexican constitution, and specifically to Constitutional Article 39. They quote it as such:

National sovereignty resides essentially and originally in the people. All public power emanates from the people and is instituted for the people's benefit. The people have, at all times, the unalienable right to alter or modify the form of their government.

Thus, the Zapatistas were, from the beginning of the uprising, engaged in a legal battle. Even before they were directly addressing national or international civil society, the Zapatistas were using the instruments and language normally employed by civil society. Significantly, they were doing so *at the same time that they were waging a violent struggle*. The General Command of the EZLN⁴⁷ stated:

We reject in advance any attempt to diminish the just cause of our struggle by accusing us of narco-traffic, narco-guerrilla war, banditry, or any other term our enemies may use. Our struggle sticks to constitutional law, and justice and equality are its banners.

The communiqué proceeds to order the Zapatista Army of National Liberation to begin their military struggle, indicating that they see possibilities for change as lying both in law or 'rights' and non-legal force or violence.

The first few public statements issued by the EZLN, then, are linguistic evidence of the strategic blending of fire and word. Marcos himself has recently commented that the fire and the word represent two different parts of the Zapatista uprising, which can be traced chronologically, beginning at the point when the rebel army began training in the mountains of southeastern Chiapas in 1984. According to him, however, the fire preceded the word, non-legal violence preceded the language of law and 'rights'. A similar pronouncement has been made in a recent article in the journal *Left Turn*. In it, Andrew Willis⁴⁸ charts the historical trajectory of the Zapatista uprising in order to assess its impact on other contemporary global justice struggles. He contends that:

Through its careful orchestration of the solidarity movement, the EZLN has perhaps proven that, in the context of anti-authoritarian social justice movements, the pen is mightier than the sword – but it is the sword, in this case, that first gave the pen legitimacy.

It is undoubtedly true that much of the anti-authoritarian left in the global North has gravitated towards the Zapatista cause in pursuit of a romantic vision of armed revolutionary struggle. It is also true that, even though they continue to train as an army, the Zapatistas have abstained from direct violent action. However, I suggest that the fire did not *precede* the word as much as it necessitated it. The Zapatistas recognized the very impossibility of separating fire and word, force and image. The power of the image lies in its force, and the power of force lies in its corresponding image. Marcos' ability to make it seem as though the word lured the Zapatistas away from violence is a successful rhetorical strategy. It is a strategy that makes the Zapatistas seem unthreatening in the eyes of an international civil society that privileges non-violence; it allows the Zapatistas to use violence, and keep a standing army (that can command monetary support), without being dubbed irrational or dangerously violent. This is the magic trick of Zapatista discourse; they have made violent struggle legible to those who would ordinarily condemn it, and in doing so, have produced a new way of engaging with human rights.

The Possibilities and Dangers of ‘Rights’

It hardly needs to be stated that the law is not a neutral instrument. As Rajagopal⁴⁹ elucidates:

...on the one hand, law needs to constitute itself as the ‘other’ of violence to be legitimate; on the other hand, it needs to use violence instrumentally to preserve power. The contradictions created by this paradox become part of the constant crises of law.

The Zapatistas, as a social movement that couches its demands in the discourse of rights, has a particularly tenuous relationship to the law and its possibility to be both a source of terror and a source of protection. The following case study usefully illustrates how law has been used by the Mexican state as a means to enact violence on the Zapatista population.

In early 1998, in the Zapatista support community of Tierra y Libertad, two brothers of Guatemalan origin were detained by the President of the Autonomous Council, the Justice Minister and Vice-Minister because they had been accused of illegally cutting wood and failed to appear when summoned by the authorities. The autonomous authorities held one of the brothers in jail for a week while attempting to negotiate a settlement with his accusers. When the second brother turned himself in, the first brother was released. On May 1, 1998, while attempting to negotiate the release of the second brother, approximately one thousand state police, federal police, soldiers, and immigration agents raided the community. The state officials accused the autonomous authorities of ‘kidnapping,’ ‘assault,’ and ‘usurping the functions’ of legitimate municipal authorities. These charges were brought against the autonomous authorities in the name of human rights. According to the state officials, the autonomous authorities were more interested in negotiating a settlement with the accusers than with presuming the brothers innocent until proven guilty. They also denied them a ‘fair and public hearing’ to assess evidence against them. Finally, they kept the brothers in jail longer than the thirty-six hours allowed by the Mexican Constitution. All of these actions can be considered human rights violations according to Articles 9, 10, and 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).⁵⁰

In Tierra y Libertad, however, autonomous authorities are elected to enforce the law *and* to respect *usos y costumbres*. Justice administered with *usos y costumbres* in mind privileges local law over state law and holds that local authorities should be able to be elected according to indigenous peoples’ local customs, and not necessarily the state dictated election and appointment laws. *Usos y costumbres* also state that the local authorities are allowed to impose sanctions, notably community service and jail time, as punishment for certain crimes.⁵¹ In this particular Zapatista community, human rights law was employed by state police authorities in order to interfere with indigenous methods of settling disputes. As Speed and Collier⁵² note:

there is good reason to believe that the arrest and imprisonment of the Tierra y Libertad authorities was a political act undertaken by the state government, in coordination with the federal government, as part of a systematic effort to eliminate autonomous municipalities in rebellion. By camouflaging this act in a discourse of rights, the government shifted a political conflict onto judicial terrain, thereby obscuring the political motivation.

In this instance, then, the UDHR was employed by the Mexican state against a Zapatista community in order to undermine the authority of the said communities’ autonomous leaders. These autonomous leaders do not always move within the confines of

state, national, or international laws. Indeed, these laws are oftentimes antithetical to their own conception of administering justice and bringing about reconciliation. In practicing indigenous law – *usos y costumbres* – the autonomous authorities make themselves vulnerable to accusations of human rights abuses. These accusations, while arguably illegitimate on ethical or moral grounds, are supported by international law.

While in this instance law tied to the discourse of human rights was used to strip agency from local authorities, and reconceptualize them as *perpetrators* of human rights abuses, in other instances law has been used *by* indigenous communities to oppose hegemonic power structures. Indeed, the Zapatistas have transformed the word into such a powerful tool by crafting their discourse using the legal language of rights. This was not an option for the original Zapatistas, whose struggle predated the emergence of rights discourse in Mexico by nearly seventy years. What Collier⁵³ refers to as ‘rights activism’ first became popular in Mexico in the 1980s. It was initially mobilized as a response to severe governmental repression and intimidation of Mexican dissidents who were involved with the 1968 protests. In 1984, private citizens set up the Mexican Academy for Human Rights and called on the international community to pressure Mexico to adhere to the stipulations set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In addition, Amnesty International called attention to the government’s unwarranted imprisonment of hundreds in rural areas.⁵⁴

By the end of the 1980s, at least thirteen human rights organizations were active in Chiapas, and together with organizations throughout the rest of Mexico, they pressured the government for electoral and judicial reform. In 1990, Mexico ratified additions to the International Labor Organization (ILO) charter which stipulated, among other things, that cultural and ethnic minorities have specific collective rights. In 1992, Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution was revised to accord Indians rights. Also in 1992, the Mexican Committee for ‘500 Years of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance’ was formed by indigenous groups throughout Mexico. Their call for indigenous rights culminated in a march from northern Chiapas to Mexico City.⁵⁵

When the Zapatistas presented themselves to the public, then, arguing for first peasant, and then indigenous rights, they were situating themselves within a larger framework of rights claiming that had already begun in Mexico. Although this framework was aware of and responsive to large international treaties such as the UDHR, which undoubtedly views the Enlightenment construct of the liberal, rational individual as the privileged rights bearing subject, it would be a mistake to see the evolution of Mexican human rights discourse as exemplary of the imposition of ‘Western values’ in a ‘non-Western’ setting. I suggest that in contemporary discussions of human rights, the terms ‘international community’ and ‘the West’ are too easily conflated and are problematically assumed to be the normative categories to which all ‘non-Western’, ‘local’ struggles must address their demands. In thinking about the global nature of human rights discourse and practice, one must resist making distinctions between ‘global’ and ‘local’ that implicitly polarize ‘the West’ with ‘the Rest’. Instead, one must acknowledge the ways in which different localities and groups are always implicated in wider sets of social, political, and economic relations, systems which render analytically useless the dichotomous distinction between ‘international community’ as ‘Western’ and ‘global’ on the one hand and ‘indigenous communities’ as ‘non-Western’ and ‘local’ on the other. It is only in light of treating the global/local distinction with the complexity with which it deserves that one can then usefully analyze both how power operates to consolidate and mobilize concepts such as

‘human rights’ in order to legitimize hegemonic power structures, and how individuals and communities such as the Zapatistas can counter such claims and produce claims of their own.

In seeing the law and the discourse of ‘rights’ as potentially problematic *and* productive of possibilities, ‘human rights’ becomes not an empty signifier, but a term open to (re)inscription and (re)interpretation. Its meaning cannot be (pre)determined, but only analyzed in its deployment in particular historical moments. In 1980s Mexico, then, the individuals and groups employing and creating international legal instruments were *producing* international civil society anew, rather than merely *contributing to or contesting it*. In adopting portions of this non-violent language of indigenous rights *while at the same time* using violence, the Zapatistas were again *reconstituting* the very meaning of human rights in contemporary Mexico. They were able to continue to command the necessary monetary and ideological support from national and international human rights organizations while not becoming beholden to a preconceived notion of how their struggle should continue to be waged.

From Indigenous Rights to Women’s Rights

In emphasizing the importance of indigenous rights in public Zapatista discourse, the Zapatistas have provided a space in which other popular Western categories of concern could be interrogated. One such category is that of ‘women’. Indeed, aside from being praised by international civil society for their emphasis on ‘indigenous rights’, the Zapatistas have also been lauded for naming the realization of ‘women’s rights’ as a central part of their struggle. A great number of the newspaper and journal articles that came out following the 10th anniversary celebration, for instance, mentioned the fact that Zapatista women engaged in a game of basketball at the *fiesta*. Most of the articles noted that these women were wearing both traditional dress *and* Western jelly slippers, as if the revolutionary potential of the Zapatista movement rested in its ability to push the marginalized figure *par excellence* – the indigenous rural woman – into a space, a basketball game, in which her words and actions could be read by Westerners.

The questionable ethics of the national and international press aside, their attention to women’s actions and dress at the celebration raises the question of how Zapatista women have presented themselves to the Mexican nation and to a wider ‘global public’. Put differently, what space do Zapatista women occupy in a discourse that conjures up a romanticized image of an indigenous past at the same time that it uses the language of a rights bearing citizen in the present?

New Spaces Open For Zapatista Women

In contrast to other revolutionary movements in Latin America, the position of women in Chiapan society at large and within the Zapatistas specifically has been a part of the Zapatista platform from the beginning of the uprising. In a communiqué issued by the CCRI-CG on November 4, 1995⁵⁶, for example, the authors state:

We call upon all men and women who in Mexico and the world struggle for democracy, liberty and justice, in order that we mobilize with regard to this fundamental demand for all human beings: respect for women.

Numerous communiqués have explicitly mentioned the importance of respecting women’s voices in the Zapatista movement. In addition, Zapatista discourse has show concern that women’s voices be respected in their homes. This concern has not been merely

rhetorical, as it has opened up spaces for women to occupy a central place in the movement as politically active organizers and supporters. Women's participation in formulating Zapatista policy, as well as their participation in their communities in other capacities, was first inaugurated by the workshop entitled 'The Rights of Women in Our Customs and Traditions,' which was held in San Cristobal de las Casas on May 19-20, 1994.⁵⁷ This workshop attempted to locate forms of local patriarchal oppression and then examine the connections between resisting local oppression and resisting state oppression carried out in the name of neoliberalism.

Since this workshop and others like it, women's participation in social and political organizations in Chiapas has begun to increase. For example, one of the major social organizations in the municipality of Ocosingo, the Coalicion de Organizaciones Autonomas de Ocosingo (Coalition of Autonomous Organizations of Ocosingo, COAO), added a women's commission in 2001, signaling the importance of putting women's issues on the organizing table.⁵⁸ Additionally, the creation of the Women's Institute in 2000 under the leadership of governor Pablo Salazar Mendiguchia was an important milestone in foregrounding women's needs and desires in Chiapas. The Women's Institute encourages 'incorporating a gender perspective into the public programs and policies of all government officials.'⁵⁹ It has provided women with funds to engage in projects such as baking, artisan production, and raising domestic animals. These activities enable women to have their own earnings, thereby fostering the economic autonomy that is necessary for women should they choose to remain single or to leave their current marriage partner, two rights the Zapatistas argue should be inalienable for all women. Before the Zapatista uprising, men occupied leadership positions in cooperatives, and for the most part, would handle the distribution and earnings garnered from the products sold. The Zapatista communiqués, then, have legitimated not only the right of indigenous peoples to claim their rights *as indigenous peoples*, but also the right of indigenous women to claim their rights *as indigenous women*.

Zapatista Women and Rights Claims: The Women's Revolutionary Law

The first articulation of a rights claim made by Zapatista indigenous women was the Women's Revolutionary Law, which was formulated and presented to the EZLN in March of 1993⁶⁰. It was dubbed by Marcos as 'the first uprising of the EZLN' which 'was led by the women Zapatistas. They suffered no losses,' he says 'and they won.'⁶¹ The Law states that women have the right to participate in the army as combatants and to assume leadership in the army; to decide how many children they want to have and when they will have them; to have primary consideration in access to health services; to an education; to the right to choose a marriage partner of their own free will, or to choose not to marry; to hold office if democratically elected in their communities; to work and receive a fair wage; and to be free from physical mistreatment from family members or strangers.⁶²

Many aspects of the Women's Revolutionary Law are congruent with 'Western' feminist demands.⁶³ This has no doubt been partially why the Zapatistas have garnered support from feminists worldwide. The Zapatista claim that women have the right to move outside the private sphere of the home and enter into the public one of politics and wage labor is especially congruent with many contemporary Western feminist ideals. However, there are important differences between Western feminist and Zapatista conceptions of the division between public and private spheres. In most Western contexts, women who are forced to (or if they have class privilege, desire to) engage in labor outside the home participate in a capitalist system that rarely allows them to see the non-abstracted fruits of their labor. In

Chiapas, on the other hand, until recently, women who engaged in labor did so for the benefit of their immediate family or community. The separation of public and private spheres did not exist in Chiapas in the same way as it did in contexts elsewhere in Mexico and the Western world. The Mexican state has only recently succeeded in producing such a distinction through its promotion of neoliberal economic reform, which pushes farmers away from subsistence farming and towards wage labor, away from rural areas and towards urban centers. For Zapatista women, then, leaving the private sphere of the home and entering into the public one of the workplace does not constitute a revolutionary or ‘emancipatory’ act. Rather, it involves inserting oneself into a newly created neoliberal political economy, a position many Zapatista women are forced into, but one few will willingly accept. This example serves to show the epistemological and ontological claims of Western feminist discourse cannot neutrally be transported to a Zapatista context. Indeed, the revolutionary potential of the Zapatista uprising for women cannot be assessed using terms and concepts that are historically and experientially situated elsewhere. Another example will further illustrate my point; this one dealing with reproductive freedom.

A woman’s right to a safe, legal abortion is a central tenet of Western feminist discourse. Perhaps partly in response to this fact, and partly because they wish to retain the greatest number of women in the Army as possible, the EZLN is committed to providing its members with safe, free abortions. This despite the fact that abortions are illegal under Mexican national law and thus largely unavailable to everyone but the wealthy. Goetze⁶⁴ sites this commitment by the EZLN as proof of ‘the extent of the dedication of the EZLN to its female combatants.’ However, as she later states, ‘many female combatants want the right to choose to become pregnant while remaining in the Army...many women claim that a soldier’s life is not as demanding as that of a woman living in a village.’⁶⁵ In contrast to the Western feminist demand which asserts the right to have an abortion, many Zapatista women demand the right to have a child. Both groups of women assert their right to control their own bodies and both use a discourse of rights to do so. The rights they claim, however, are quite different.

Western feminists’ and female Zapatistas’ different relationship to the two aforementioned issues – moving out of the private sphere in order to engage in wage labor and the politics of abortion – illuminate the fact that although the Zapatistas may employ a language of ‘women’s rights’ to articulate their concerns and demands, they do so in a non-Western setting. The disjuncture between the use of rights language in two different conceptual settings has caused some (Western) feminists to argue that ‘a radical rethinking of gendered social relations has not been part of Zapatista discourse or practice.’⁶⁶ I would argue though, that the Zapatista discursive resignification of the indigenous woman who can participate in political and social life, claim economic control, and declare her rights *as an indigenous woman*, provides her with a space in which to act. This is particularly true if one admits that action need not follow a teleological path towards a concept of ‘liberation’. As Saba Mahmood⁶⁷ argues:

...the liberatory goals of feminism should be rethought in light of the fact that the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject. What follows from this, I would contend, is that in analyzing the question of politics we must begin with a set of fundamental questions about the conceptual relationship between the body, self, and moral agency as constituted in different

cultural and political locations, and not hold one particular model to be axiomatic as is often the case in progressivist narratives.

I do not intend my examples to serve as evidence of the impossibility of reconciling Western feminist and Zapatista demands. Such a view would support a reactionary politics that denies the complex ways in which discourses and practices are both *transplanted* and *translated* across and through disparate geographical and ideological spaces. Rather, I hope such examples will serve as a reminder that a progressive feminist politics must be historically and culturally situated; it is only in this way that it can address itself to a global public and be rendered intelligible. Catherine Eschle's notion of *transversal feminism* provides a helpful model. Eschle⁶⁸ argues that feminist activism must theorize power as global in scope, but must strategize from specific locations, and then attempt to pursue the ways in which such strategies can be linked between and through social movements. Doing so, she says,

*gives rise to a view of transformatory change that combines an emphasis on the necessary plurality of sites and sources of struggle with an insistence on the need to build more general alliances and maintains an oppositional stance toward state, economic, and cultural sources of power.*⁶⁹

With this in mind, the Zapatistas' call for 'women's rights', should not be viewed as merely a rhetorical strategy used to gain the support of Western feminists, but rather as a way in which the Zapatistas are *producing a transversal feminist politics*. It does not shy away from the *language* of liberation, but it refuses a standard reading of liberation as a break from the so-called traditional past.

One might argue that although the Zapatistas may be engaging with human rights discourse in a creative and innovative way, their (re)imagining of what is possible means little if their thoughts and actions are not globally understood. As Gayatri Spivak⁷⁰ elucidated in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', one's actions become meaningless if they are rendered unintelligible. In other words, when Zapatista women appeal to a discourse of women's rights as indigenous *women*, their actions become legitimate (and presumably legible) in the eyes of the international feminist community. However, once they acknowledge being recognized by this community, the possibility presents itself that they will be *misrecognized* or even *unrecognized* in the future. Similarly, when male and female Zapatistas appeal to a discourse of human rights as *indigenous people*, their actions become legitimate (and presumably legible) in the eyes of the international human rights community. However, the problem of being *misrecognized* or *unrecognized* by the international human rights community also presents itself as a possibility.

While one cannot deny the politics of cultural (mis)translation always at play in any given situation, it would be a mistake to read the relationship between Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas as static and dichotomous. Undoubtedly the Zapatistas have used strategically the Western Orientalist conception of the indigenous (and potentially violent) peasant and the Western privileging of the discourse of rights to their advantage. However, just as the Zapatistas are not passive in the face of others' interpretations of and responses to their discourse, the global public to which Zapatista discourse is addressed does not interpret and respond in a void. The relationship between the Zapatistas and the global public, in other words, is predicated on constant cultural, political, and economic exchange. It is this exchange which lends meaning to the struggle.

Is Another World Possible?: The Revolutionary Potential of Zapatista Discourse

The exchange between the Zapatistas and the wider international community, particularly the global justice movement, has been ongoing for over ten years now. Currently, the Zapatistas appear to be at a crossroads. On the one hand, one could say that the 10th anniversary celebration's potential for articulating (or perhaps creating) an image of a Zapatista future was lost amidst concerns over Marcos' absence, the small number of attendees (2,000, 1,000 of whom were foreigners), and a decline in international monetary aid to the movement. There was an admittedly dejected tone in the newspaper articles written shortly after the celebration. 'Now the Zapatistas are less a guerrilla army than a social movement,' journalist Susan Ferriss⁷¹ remarked. 'Since they changed their tactics and began their silent resistance nearly three years ago, the Zapatistas have lost much of the international attention that brought them aid from humanitarian organizations,' commented S. Lynne Walker⁷². It has undoubtedly partly been the Zapatistas eloquent and strategic use of the word that has sustained international interest in them over the past ten years. It seems, however, that the word has begun to lose its potency. Perhaps this is because the word garnered a portion of its power from the fire, and as of late, the Zapatistas have failed to ignite so much as a spark. It was a combination of fire and word, a partnership that manifested in the form of a Benjaminian flash, that made the Zapatistas so alluring to national and international civil society.

As I reflect on the supposed demise of the Zapatista movement, however, I think back to the 10th anniversary celebration. I remember the photos documenting the United State's occupation of Iraq mounted next to a life size painting of Emiliano Zapata. I remember the newly created *junta de buen gobierno* and the newly built schools where Zapatista children will learn how to read and write in their indigenous languages, and will be taught a history in which their ancestors are discussed with dignity and respect. I remember being humbled by the openness with which the Zapatistas welcomed those they had never met into their communities and their homes. To be sure, the relationship between the Zapatistas and wider international civil society has been and continues to be fraught with tension and ambivalence. In our current geopolitical situation, though, where the relationship between global North and global South is sustained by and through clandestine economic transactions, war, band-aid humanitarian interventions, and patronizing development projects, the Zapatistas have provided us with a glimpse of another reality. Through their discourse and practice, they have proven that 'globalization from below' can be a creative force. They have imagined a world in which Fourth World Peoples can command attention by reinterpreting and reinscribing history in order to live in a more fully possible present, and in order to build a more just future. They have done all of this without foreclosing the possibility that a flickering flame may be just around the bend. After all, while revolution's foundation may take time to build and grow, revolution itself always articulates itself as a flash of surprise.

¹ Ladinos are Mexicans who are ethnically both indigenous Indian and Spanish European. For the most part, they form the middle and upper classes of Mexican society. The dominant Ladino discourse in Mexico regards Indians as more 'traditional' and less 'civilized' than Ladinos or Spanish Europeans. For more on ethnicity in Chiapas, including Indian responses to Ladino oppression, see Gossen, G.H. *Telling Maya Tales: Tzotzil Identities in Modern Mexico* (London: Routledge, 1998).

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- ² This translates roughly to ‘Enough is enough’. Unless otherwise indicated all translation is my own.
- ³ Brecher, J., Costello, T., and Smith, B. *Globalization From Below: The Power of Solidarity* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), 5.
- ⁴ Carrigan, A. “Chiapas, The First Postmodern Revolution” in *Our Word Is Our Weapon: Selected Writings, Subcomandante Marcos*. Ed. Juan Ponce de Leon (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 417-443.
- ⁵ One of the first things tourists encounter when they arrive in the highland city of San Cristobal de las Casas is indigenous women from nearby villages selling Marcos keychains, pens, and miniature dolls.
- ⁶ Bedregal, X. “Chiapas: Considerations from our Feminist Point of View,” Trans. Ximena Bedregal in *Chiapas, y las mujeres que?* Ed. Rosa Rojas (Mexico D.F.: Ediciones La Correa Feminista. Centro de Investigacion y Capacitacion de la Mujer A.C.).
- ⁷ It should be noted that although Marcos has been instrumental in bridging the gap between rural and urban, North and South, literate and illiterate, he has consistently refused the title of ‘leader’ and has emphasized the non-hierarchical aspect of Zapatista discourse and practice. Significantly, he does not make decisions *for* the illiterate, indigenous Zapatista peasants. Indeed, he voted against going to war on January 1, 1994 because he did not think the EZLN was organizationally or militarily ready. Because the majority of Zapatistas did wish to go to war, however, particularly because of the date’s concomitance with the operationalization of NAFTA, war was declared. This is just one example of the democratic nature of decision making in Zapatista communities.
- ⁸ Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. edition. (London: Verso, 1991[1983]), 5.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ This translates to ‘Do you have a passport?’
- ¹¹ This translates to ‘Che Guevara Cooperative Store’.
- ¹² This translates to ‘Women for dignity’.
- ¹³ This translates roughly to ‘Zapatista networks in movement for national liberation’.
- ¹⁴ This translates to ‘Are you here for the party/celebration?’
- ¹⁵ Taussig, M. *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 248.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 247.
- ¹⁸ Aridjis, H. “Indian Is Beautiful,” Trans. Russell Cobb in *The Zapatista Reader*. Ed. Tom Hayden (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002), 142-144.
- ¹⁹ Paz, O. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985[1961]), 209-210.
- ²⁰ Benjamin, W. “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Arendt, H. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968[1955]), 255.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Womack, J. Jr. *Rebellion in Chiapas: An Historical Reader* (New York: The New Press, 1999).
- ²³ Howell, K. M. “The Betrayal of the Mexican Revolution: The Zapatista Response,” B.A. Honors Thesis (Department of Political Science: Barnard College, 1999), 11.
- ²⁴ Hellman, J. A. *Mexico in Crisis* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1978), 21.
- ²⁵ Paz, O. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985[1961]), 144.
- ²⁶ Apreza, Y. C. “J’pas Joloviletik-Jolom Mayateik-K’inale Antzetik: An Organizational Experience of Indigenous and Mestiza Women,” Trans. Jeanette Minnie in *Women of Chiapas: Making History in Times of Struggle and Hope*. Eds. Christine Eber and Christine Kovic (London: Routledge, 2003), 212.
- ²⁷ Paz, O. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985[1961]), 148.
- ²⁸ EZLN. “Comunicado del CCRI-CG, Piliogo De Demandas, 1 de Marzo.” in *La palabra de los armadas de verdad y fuego: Entrevistas, cartas, y comunicados del EZLN*, 3 vols. Eds. Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1 (Mexico City: Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1994), 263-269.
- ²⁹ Problem #4.
- ³⁰ Problem #8.
- ³¹ EZLN. “EZLN: Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle,” (www.ezln.org., 1996).
- ³² Collier, G. A. with Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello. *Basta!: Land & the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*, Rev. edition. (Oakland: Food First Books, 1999[1994]), 158.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.

- ³⁵ EZLN. "EZLN: El Despertador Mexicano, Organo Informativo Del EZLN, Mexico, No. 1, Diciembre 1993," in *La palabra de los armadas de verdad y fuego: Entrevistas, cartas, y comunicados del EZLN*, 3 vols. Eds. Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1 (Mexico City: Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1993), 14-18.
- ³⁶ EZLN. "Comunicado del CCRI-CG, Piliigo De Demandas, 1 de Marzo." in *La palabra de los armadas de verdad y fuego: Entrevistas, cartas, y comunicados del EZLN*, 3 vols. Eds. Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1 (Mexico City: Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1994), 263-269.
- ³⁷ EZLN. "EZLN: Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle," (www.ezln.org, 1996).
- ³⁸ Collier, G. A. with Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello. *Basta!: Land & the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*, Rev. edition. (Oakland: Food First Books, 1999[1994]).
- ³⁹ Womack notes that the word *platica* in Spanish has a few meanings, all of which are conveyed in discussions of the Revolution. It is commonly meant 'conversation' or 'talk', and is used 'with the purpose of explanation or reassurance or encouragement of consensus.' Womack, J. Jr. *Rebellion in Chiapas: An Historical Reader* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 97. Such are the different ways in which people in Chiapas talk about the Mexican Revolution.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 99.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ This translates to '20 and 10, the fire and the word'.
- ⁴⁵ They did not, however, lay down the physical weapons altogether.
- ⁴⁶ EZLN. "EZLN: Declaracion de la Selva Lacandona." (www.ezln.org, 1994).
- ⁴⁷ EZLN. "EZLN: El Despertador Mexicano, Organo Informativo Del EZLN, Mexico, No. 1, Diciembre 1993," in *La palabra de los armadas de verdad y fuego: Entrevistas, cartas, y comunicados del EZLN*, 3 vols. Eds. Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1 (Mexico City: Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1993), 14-18.
- ⁴⁸ Willis, A. "Zapatista Retrospective: Rebellion for the Possibility of Tomorrow," *Left Turn* (March/April 2004), 44.
- ⁴⁹ Rajagopal, B. *International Law From Below: Development, Social Movements, and Third World Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 197.
- ⁵⁰ Collier, J. F. and Speed, S. "Limiting Indigenous Autonomy in Chiapas, Mexico: The State Government's Use of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* Volume 22 (2000:877-905), 898.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 899.
- ⁵³ Collier, G. A. with Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello. *Basta!: Land & the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*, Rev. edition. (Oakland: Food First Books, 1999[1994]).
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ EZLN. "EZLN Communique, 4 November," (www.ezln.org, 1995).
- ⁵⁷ Rojas, R. *Chiapas, y las mujeres que?* Ed. Rosa Rojas (Mexico D.F.: Ediciones La Correa Feminista, Centro de Investigacion y Capacitacion de la Mujer A.C., 1994).
- ⁵⁸ Apreza, Y. C. "J'pas Joloviletik-Jolom Mayateik-K'in al Antzetik: An Organizational Experience of Indigenous and Mestiza Women," Trans. Jeanette Minnie in *Women of Chiapas: Making History in Times of Struggle and Hope*. Eds. Christine Eber and Christine Kovic (London: Routledge, 2003).
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.
- ⁶⁰ EZLN. "EZLN: The Women's Revolutionary Law," *El Despertador Mexicano* (January 1 1994).
- ⁶¹ Goetze, A. "The Zapatista Women: The Movement From Within," (<http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~geneve/zapwomen/goetze/thesis.html>).
- ⁶² EZLN. "EZLN: The Women's Revolutionary Law," *El Despertador Mexicano* (January 1 1994).
- ⁶³ I define feminism as 1) an analytic category that, like all analytic categories, is constantly being reformulated and reinterpreted and 2) as a political movement that has a particular historical trajectory in western Europe and the United States. When I mention "feminism" or "Western feminists" in this paper I am pointing to the fact that although feminist discourse exists only through myriad competing claims, there is a more or less coherent understanding of the historical and political foundations of feminism in what is generally understood as "the West". I do not employ "Western feminism" and "Western feminists" as geographic categories, but rather ideological ones. Thus, I refer to women in Third World contexts who model their feminism on that which has come out of Europe and the United States as "Western feminists". This is the case with many

Mexican feminists, most of whom have been educated in institutions that privilege Western modes of negotiating philosophy and historiography. Most of these women live in urban settings.

⁶⁴ Goetze, A. "The Zapatista Women: The Movement From Within," (<http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~geneve/zapwomen/goetze/thesis.html>), 9.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁶ Speed, S. "Actions Speak Louder Than Words: Indigenous Women and Gendered Resistance in the Wake of Acteal," in *Women of Chiapas: Making History in Times of Struggle and Hope*. Eds. Christine Eber and Christine Kovic (London: Routledge, 2003), 6.

⁶⁷ Mahmood, S. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* Volume 16 Issue 2 (2001:202-236), 223.

⁶⁸ Eschle, C. *Global Democracy, Social Movements, and Feminism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 218.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 218.

⁷⁰ Spivak, G. C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculations on Widow Sacrifice," *Wedge* Volume 7 Issue 8 (1985:120-30).

⁷¹ Ferriss, S. "Africa and Aboriginal Tuesdays: [Dec. 30 – Jan. 4th 2004]: Zapatista Uprising," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (January 4 2004).

⁷² Walker, S. L. "Does Violence Pay?: International aid agencies lose interest after Zapatistas farewell to arms," *The San Diego Union-Tribune* (December 29 2003).