Ensayo de Reseña/Review Essay

Chiapas and the Zapatistas: Filling in the Picture

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– *Mayan lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion*, edited by Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, and Shannan L. Mattiace. Lanham etc: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003.
– *To See with Two Eyes: Peasant Activism and Indian Autonomy in Chiapas, Mexico*, by Shannan L. Mattiace. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003.
– *Mayan Suffering, Mayan Rights: Faith and Citizenship among Catholic Tzotziles in Highland Chiapas, Mexico*, by Heidi Moksnes. Göteborg: Göteborg University, 2003.
– *Uprising of Hope: Sharing the Zapatista Journey to Alternative Development*, by Duncan Earle and Jeanne Simonelli. Walnut Creek etc: Altamira Press, 2005.

Immediately after the Zapatista uprising of 1994, many studies were dedicated to identifying the root causes of the rebellion and describing its major actors, the militants and civil supporters of the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*). In the years following, much attention was given to the overall development of the Chiapas conflict and especially to the peace negotiations between the Mexican government and the rebels on the issue of indigenous rights and culture, the San Andrés Accords, and the difficulties over the implementation of these. Those studies offered a 'front stage' view of the conflict in Chiapas, giving us an understanding of the key protagonists and the official agendas.

Further studies are now appearing that add more depth and nuance to this picture. Such works offer analyses of the impacts of the uprising in different regions of Chiapas, the variety of responses expressed by different sectors of the indigenous population, and the multiple re-negotiations of the Zapatista project both within and around the movement. They have given more insight into what had been happening 'back stage', in the different spaces in which Zapatismo was (and is being) constructed, negotiated and contested. They have uncovered a variety of narratives on Zapatismo and the Zapatista movement, and have allowed for a certain 'de-centring' of indigenous political activism, by analysing other sites where proposals and projects are being generated.

Studies like these reviewed here do not only allow for a more nuanced understanding of the uprising and its repercussions in Chiapas, they also address crucial issues on indigenous mobilization and ethnic politics and, with that, some of the core concerns of current anthropology and political science. In particular, they teach us a great deal about indigenous political agency and its complexities, the translocal nature of current political projects, and the continuous (re-) construction of 'Indian-ness' and ethnic demands. Finally, these works engage with debates about the anthropological enterprise.

The studies discussed in this review essay were all published in the past two years and written by scholars with extensive field experience in Chiapas. *Mayan lives, Mayan Utopias* edited by Jan Rus, Aída Hernández and Shannan Mattiace presents a collection of articles on the different experiences with, and responses to, the Zapatista uprising of indigenous populations in Chiapas.[1] As they explain in the introduction, the editors see the Zapatista uprising as one of the expressions of indigenous activism in response to the economic crisis and the exploitation of the past thirty years, and the different contributions to the volume place it in this broader context. After the introduction, which sketches the socio-economic and political backgrounds to the Zapatista uprising and summarises the major events since 1994, nine chapters follow, divided into three parts. The first part focuses on those populations that, though affected by the uprising, chose not to join the rebel movement. The second part looks at populations that did join or that took up elements of the revolutionary agenda. The third part focuses on the proposals ('utopias') of indigenous populations and organizations for constructing a new relation with the nation-state.

In her book *To See with Two Eyes*, Shannan Mattiace examines in more detail the indigenous proposals for autonomy that have taken shape in Chiapas since 1994. Drawing on a case study of indigenous political organizing in the Tojolabal region (which has been studied relatively little but has provided one of the models for regional autonomy promoted in Chiapas), she relates the current 'ethnic' demand for autonomy to earlier experiences of peasant organization in which 'class' demands (land redistribution, credit) were more prominent, and argues that in Indian activism the two are strongly linked. Mattiace presents the different viewpoints on autonomy that were expressed during the San Andrés dialogues as well as some questions that are still unresolved. (Some of these arguments are also present in her contribution to the edited volume).

Heidi Moksnes' PhD thesis from Göteborg University *Mayan Suffering, Mayan Rights* analyses the Catholic organization 'Las Abejas' in the Highland municipality of Chenalhó. Her main interest is in the construction of collective agency and the role of global discourses on social justice and indigenous rights in this process. 'Las Abejas' became an important symbol of the conflict in Chiapas when forty-five of its members were massacred by paramilitaries at Acteal in December 1997. Ironically, 'Las Abejas' supported the Zapatista demands but had opted for pacific strategies and a neutral position. Moksnes shows how the Zapatista uprising penetrated and changed the political landscape in Chenalhó and provides a detailed account of the events that led up to the massacre.

Duncan Earle and Jeanne Simonelli narrate their experience of getting into contact with what turned out to be a Zapatista base community and their subsequent journey to jointly develop alternative paths of development. *Uprising of Hope* presents a detailed ethnography of the interaction and mutual learning that occurred between this community, the researchers and their students. With its vivid descriptions, this book brings the men and women 'behind the mask' to life – or as they themselves put it, 'the people who live out the day-to-day struggles for a better tomorrow' (p. 6). Overall developments, such as the repression of 1998 and the changes in the Zapatista organizational structure with the introduction of the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* in 2003, are interwoven in the narrative and shown in their significance in daily life of the Zapatista bases.

The Zapatista uprising had repercussions far beyond its original heartland, the

Cañadas of the Lacandón Rainforest. In the adjacent Central Highlands and the northern region as well as in the more distant Sierra Madre in southwestern Chiapas, the insurrection sparked debate, stirred hopes and prompted people to take sides (see the contributions in *Mayan lives, Mayan Utopias*). The responses of Chiapas' indigenous population included active adherence or support as well as silent rejection and overt opposition. Many of the studies reviewed analyse how the different meanings attached to the uprising and the nature of the response of different groups were, amongst other factors, 'shaped by their organizational histories, by differences in their experiences vis-à-vis the state, and by religious affiliations' (Hernández, *Mayan lives, Mayan Utopias*, p. 64).

The uprising had an immediate appeal beyond the Cañadas. In the course of 1994, Zapatista civil support bases were formed in the Highlands (described for Chenalhó by Moksnes and Eber, edited volume), and in the Sierra Madre several communities also linked up to a Zapatista autonomous municipality. Many other groups, however, chose to support the Zapatista demands without integrating themselves into the organizational structure of the EZLN. This was the case of Las Abejas, studied by Moksnes, but also of many other socio-political organizations within the conflict zone (the Tojolabal ejido union described by Mattiace) as well as outside it (the ISMAM organic coffee growers in the Hernández chapter). Organizations such as these joined the broad coalition that was formed in early 1994 in support of the Zapatista demands,[2] and that was the core of the civil disobedience movement that arose in the state. During those early years, 'Zapatismo' seems to have been a confluence of various projects promoted by different social actors, inspired by and connected to the EZLN, but only partially controlled by it.

This confluence did not last, however. Strained by internal contradictions and the lack of any real progress after the San Andrés Accords, the coalitions eventually dissolved. Many organizations felt the EZLN's rejection of state assistance and its refusal to negotiate with the government was detrimental to their own objectives and they distanced themselves from the rebel movement (as was the case for example of the ISMAM coffee growers studied by Hernández).

All over Chiapas, the Zapatista uprising changed the political landscape and became a factor in the ongoing factional struggles. Even in places with no strong Zapatista presence, like in Zinacantán, the indigenous population started to question local elites and forced them out of municipal government (Rus and Collier). In many other places, the population became divided over the issue of Zapatista adherence, which added to existing divisions along political and religious lines and strained coexistence. In Chenalhó, for example, the Catholics split over the uprising, as some joined Zapatista base groups, whereas others (Las Abejas) opted for a non-violent line, in alliance with the San Cristóbal Diocese (Moksnes). In the Cañadas region, the uprising detonated the fragmentation of the existing peasant organization (the *Unión de Uniones*; Leyva, edited volume). The state government fuelled polarization by freeing considerable resources for groups opposing the Zapatistas and condoning acts of violence. The decade of the uprising has thus been a period of intensified politicization and factional strife among indigenous groups, breaking up wider communities and alliances, and yet at the same time collective action continued to be a crucial strategy (see Moksnes).

Local factional conflicts became interlocked with the broader conflict. Moksnes documents how this played out for Chenalhó, where local actors became linked to the political agendas of the EZLN, the Diocese and the state government, respec-

tively (especially Ch. 11). By 1996, the creation of a Zapatista autonomous municipality had become a major source of tension. The situation worsened quickly when the peace negotiations between the EZLN and the Mexican government broke down, and armed militant anti-Zapatista groups (paramilitaries) were formed. In the course of 1997, paramilitaries (backed and probably supported by the state government) came to exercise a regime of terror, giving rise to massive displacements of population. In Acteal, in one of the camps where both Zapatistas and Las Abejas members had taken refuge, the latter became the victims of a massacre on 22 December of that year, the Zapatistas having already fled in response to the threats (see also Eber, edited volume).

Threats of violence and forced displacements repeated themselves throughout Chiapas, especially during the years from 1998 to 2000 when the state government actively opposed the autonomous municipalities. Earle and Simonelli describe how the military presence and especially the dismantling of the autonomous municipality Tierra y Libertad affected the people they were working with (Chapter 6), and their own presence. However, the texts also point to examples of negotiation and low-profile attempts at reconciliation at local and regional levels (Leyva, edited volume; Earle and Simonelli, Chapter 9), which met with a more favourable climate by 2001, when after elections the state government abandoned its antagonistic policies.

As is well known, during the second year of the uprising the issue of 'indigenous autonomy' became prominent. The studies reviewed here make clear that there has been an ongoing debate, both within indigenous populations and between them and non-indigenous sectors of society, about the meanings and forms of autonomy (Mattiace, Burguete, edited volume). During the years of the San Andrés dialogues a number of different viewpoints were being expressed and two different autonomy projects were launched with on the one hand, the so-called 'pluriethnic autonomous regions' (or RAP for its abbreviation in Spanish) promoted by the ANIPA (*Asamblea Nacional Indígena por la Autonomía*), and on the other hand, the autonomous municipalities promoted by the EZLN.

Although, as Mattiace argues for the Tojolabal case, indigenous communities and organizations can be autonomous in terms of conflict resolution and the election of authorities, the forms of autonomy implemented were not simply institutionalizations of existing practice. Indeed, certain contradictions arose between the models and indigenous practices. Mattiace argues that in the Tojolabal region, the RAP arose in response to given political opportunities but was not easily connected to grassroots experiences. Also in the case of Zapatista autonomous municipalities, as Eber (edited volume) shows for the region of Chenalhó, there were some tensions between traditional gender roles and the participation of women promoted by the EZLN, and diverging conceptions of 'indigenous' culture. Earle and Simonelli found that there were considerable negotiations going on among the different levels within the Zapatista autonomy structures, as local communities such as those they worked with sought to establish what their degree of autonomy was vis-à-vis the autonomous municipality (Ch. 10). One would like to see such internal debates and negotiations further explored.

The autonomy debates in Chiapas gave the indigenous peoples a platform to voice multiple demands. They engaged in a strong critique of the Mexican State and its interventionist practices, and expressed ambitions to overcome poverty, subordination, and political exclusion, linking autonomy to demands for citizen-

ship and social justice. It seems useful to understand the significance of the autonomy debate less in terms of the development of blueprints and more in terms of their contribution to creating spaces for indigenous peoples to 'imagine alternative futures' (Mattiace, edited volume, p. 186) and to gain 'greater control over their lives' (Eber, edited volume, p. 154).

The studies reviewed here make clear that the political projects taking shape in Chiapas are translocal in nature. Such projects span different social and geographical spaces and involve actors at different sites. Especially the studies by Moksnes and by Earle and Simonelli further our understanding of this process. Moksnes shows how a 'liberation theological narrative' and a 'translocal support community' have shaped the Las Abejas members' 'understanding of the Mexican and international society and their place within it' and have provided 'a base for political activism' (p. 1). After the massacre, Las Abejas jumped to the centre of national and international attention, and even established interlocution with the UN. This gave its members a strong sense of connection to what they saw as 'a global struggle for peace and justice' that framed their understanding of what had happened to them (p. 24; Ch. 12).

Earle and Simonelli's book documents the development of the exchange and working relationship between a Zapatista community and members of two American universities. Despite the 'global' projection of the EZLN, international contacts were not evenly distributed and it required considerable effort from the community in question to find such an outside 'connection'. Once the contact was established, a shared project was gradually defined that developed simultaneously in the homes and community buildings of the small community, San Cristóbal NGO offices, the two US university campuses, and in e-mail-exchanges. The connection involved not only a transfer of resources (as the American students raised money and sold the honey produced by the community), but also the translation of meanings between these different spaces.

Moksnes argues that the connection to global discourses and networks can help local groups challenge their subordinated position (p. 7; and Leyva, edited volume, p. 178), but she also makes a critical note on the dependency in the relation between Las Abejas and the Diocese and suggests that this relation may have prevented the former from forging alliances with other indigenous organizations in Chiapas. The EZLN seems to have a similar lack of local alliances, an issue that unfortunately is not addressed in any of the studies under review here.

In recent years, activist, committed anthropology is being advocated in many writings on Chiapas. This position is also present in several of these studies. For Earle and Simonelli it was a starting point to link research to the support of alternative development and to share the control over the research process with the population they worked with. They situate themselves, conceptually and textually, within the processes they describe and insert their own voices into the narrative. Moksnes also situates herself as part of the translocal connections that she is analysing and describes for example how she received the news of the massacre in Europe and came to play a role in organizing an encounter of Las Abejas with the UN. These authors practice an anthropology of encounter and engagement (also Eber, edited volume).

Different kinds of challenges are also raised that seem equally critical to anthropology today. These concern the analysis and understanding of indigenous political activism in all its complexity, for which it seems necessary to bridge the

divide between political science and anthropology. There is an argument for what we might call the ethnography of political practice, in which indigenous facilitating is understood in relation to the 'political and historical conditions' under which it takes place (Mattiace, p. 155), or the 'situatedness' of such political action (Moksnes). Another challenge is to move beyond partial accounts, which easily add to polarization. Leyva argues in this regard for acknowledging 'local complexities beyond personal sympathy or militancy' and extending 'the analysis to the practices, discourses, and ideologies of all those involved' (edited volume, p. 182). This seems pertinent for the case of Chiapas where still too often 'the Zapatistas' are juxtaposed with an undifferentiated and under-studied 'rest'.

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Notes

1. Some of the contributions were published earlier in *Latin American Perspectives*, March 2001 (Issue 117, Volume 28). A Spanish version of the volume was published in 2002, by CIESAS and IWGIA, under the title *Tierra, libertad y autonomía: Impactos regionales del zapatismo en Chiapas*.
2. The CEOIC (*Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinas*) was later transformed into the AEDPECH (*Asamblea Estatal Democrática del Pueblo Chiapaneco*).