Politics, Identity, and Mexico’s Indigenous
Rights Movements

Drawing on years of field research and an original survey of more than 5,000 respondents, this book argues that, contrary to claims by the 1994 Zapatista insurgency, indigenous and non-indigenous respondents in southern Mexico have been united by their socio-economic conditions and land tenure institutions as much as, or more than, by their ethnic identities. The prevalence of communitarian attitudes in rural Chiapas – as compared with neighboring Oaxaca – is the result of centuries of peasant repression, the form land tenure institutions take, and indigenous identity. Contrary to many analyses of Chiapas’ 1994 indigenous rebellion, Todd A. Eisenstadt argues, using a comparison with Oaxaca, that structural factors like social and economic history can trump ethnic identity in the formation of individuals' attitudes regarding individual and collective rights. The book finds that in Oaxaca, where indigenous communities have been less repressed and where land tenure institutions emphasize individual property rights, indigenous and non-indigenous survey respondents adopt individual rights-favoring positions, rather than those favoring collective rights. Further evidence for this argument is found by comparing the non-indigenous 2006 anti-government social movement in Oaxaca to Chiapas’ 1994 Zapatista insurgency, which acquired a strong indigenous rights platform, but only after an initial discourse of class-based revolution.

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Politics, Identity, and Mexico’s Indigenous Rights Movements

TODD A. EISENSTADT

American University
To Planting Trees with Guapasan, and the Many

Other Adventures that Await
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Every student of Mexico has an opinion about the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas and its role in Mexico’s recent political history. For that reason, this has not been an easy topic to research or an easy book to write. But for that same reason, it was an extremely rewarding book to write, and I hope I was up to the challenge. While a whole generation of cool-headed analysts is coming of age, some of the early scholarship treated these social movement underdogs as a cause to fight for rather than as a phenomenon to study. Activism definitely has its place, but I have tried here to focus mostly on scholarship. I must confess great personal sympathy for the movement when I started taking research trips to southern Mexico as part of my dissertation research in the mid-1990s.

By the late 1990s, I was hooked on the story unfolding in Chiapas and found several excuses to return even before I was formally working on this book. The Zapatistas have faded, although they can claim many accomplishments. But the scholarly community, led by several brave researchers in San Cristóbal de las Casas and a few in Mexico City, has started reckoning more objectively with the strengths and weaknesses of that movement, its broader lessons, and what it has portended for southern Mexico’s development model and for the indigenous autonomy model the Zapatistas soarticulately advocated.

If I am able to contribute to this discussion, it will have been by arriving in Chiapas by way of Oaxaca. As a complement to the superlatives of Chiapas, I was lucky to find in Oaxaca a less politicized environment (at least before 2006), clever but unpretentious colleagues with whom to discuss important issues, and an empirical counterpoint to the polemical academic battlefields of Chiapas (and all international events relating to Chiapas). Although I only started framing the comparison between the polarized and
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centralized movement in Chiapas with the workaday, bottom-up movements in Oaxaca after the 2006 Oaxaca urban revolt (which was devoid of indigenous identity issues), I was making implicit connections well before then. Not to mention that the less-studied (and hence less intellectually pigeonholed) context of Oaxaca offered an emotionally and intellectually vibrant balance against the hyper-intensity of Chiapas.

Both field research environments were fascinating respites from my more mundane university office back in the United States, and they beckon me still. Colleagues from around the hemisphere have read and commented on portions of this manuscript, and I thank all of them, with the usual caveat that any mistakes in this text are mine and mine alone. First, I thank friend and colleague Shannan Mattiace who allowed me to use a grant proposal we co-authored as the basis for several pages in Chapter 7, gave me access to her archive of Zapatista movement founding documents, and offered friendly advice and support throughout the process, as well as a good critical read. Next, I thank my outstanding doctoral student, Michael S. Danielson, whose own dissertation in some regards grew out of paths stemming from research we jointly conducted (with our Oaxacan colleagues) for this book and papers we have written. Danielson generously contributed his growing expertise to this project, as did my former undergraduate research assistant, Viridiana Ríos, whose own doctoral career in political science has also prospered since we worked together in Mexico City on postelectoral conflicts in Oaxaca. Jennifer Yelle has stepped in very ably to index, proofread, and otherwise serve as research assistant for the completion of this volume. She is also emerging as an outstanding researcher in her own right, and the last (but far from least) student I have had the privilege of working with on research related to this book.

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