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Introduction

In the hours before first light on New Year's Day of 1994, soldiers of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) slipped down from the mountains under cover of mist and captured four towns in southern Mexico. In San Cristóbal de las Casas they occupied the central square and the municipal buildings. In Ocosingo they took over the radio station, broadcasting news of the revolution. With surprise on their side, they held off Mexican soldiers stationed at a nearby army garrison, even though many of the rebels carried only wooden replicas of guns or no weapons at all.

On January 2, Subcomandante Marcos began to issue statements and press releases, and he established contact with the chief editor of a prominent national newspaper in Mexico City. He explained that what drove Mexico's peasants to violence was the suspension of land redistribution through the amendment of Article 27 of the Constitution. The uprising took place on the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, and the insurgents took a stand against neo-liberalism and globalization. In their first communiqué, the EZLN demanded land, housing, schools, jobs with fair wages, hospitals, roads, an end to NAFTA, and democracy.

The Mexican army was quick to reinforce its presence in Chiapas and retaliated against the rebels, taking back the towns the Zapatistas had occupied within a few days. Approximately 400 people – mostly rebels and civilians – were killed in fighting over the next two weeks. The guerrillas retreated toward the Lacandón Jungle, and President Salinas declared a cease-fire 12 days after fighting had started. On February 21, formal negotiations began between the government and the Zapatista National Liberation Army.

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The original leaders of the EZLN were Maoist students and teachers who began to organize peasants in the Lacandón Jungle of Chiapas in 1982. These urban activists were able to capitalize on already well-established networks of peasant organization and mobilization rooted in longstanding struggles for land redistribution. By 1994, the Zapatista army consisted of roughly 2,000 fighters, many of whom were Tzeltal Indians.

They located themselves in the ideological tradition of the Mexican Revolution, and they took the name of Zapata to situate their identity in a distinctly Mexican, and distinctly class-based, political paradigm (Le Bot, 1997). They claimed that they had learned their military tactics from such Mexican heroes as Hidalgo, Morelos, Guerrero, Mina, Zapata, and Villa (Weinberg, 2000: 108). The Zapatistas insisted that they, and not the government of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), were the real "inheritors of the Revolution," and they accused the ruling party of betraying the founding ideals of the Mexican nation.

The Mexican government countered by denouncing the uprising as the work of foreign instigators, attempting to discredit the EZLN by linking it to the outdated Central American guerrillas of the 1980s. Support for the Zapatistas did not come from the revolutionary governments and parties of Central America however. It came from indigenous rights activists, both in Mexico and abroad. Speaking as an indigenous woman, the Nobel Prize–winning Quiché activist Rigoberta Menchú expressed immediate solidarity with the Zapatista movement.[1] The most popular images of the uprising were those that showed rebel soldiers in indigenous dress, holding guns fashioned from wood that would never shoot bullets. People everywhere felt sympathy with the masked indigenous women who faced the Mexican army's machine guns wearing traditional *huipils* and carrying babies on their backs.

[1] Letter to the EZLN from Rigoberta Menchú, in author's possession.

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In February 1996 the Mexican government and the EZLN concluded the San Andrés peace accords governing "the relationship between indigenous peoples and the state." The accords focused exclusively on indigenous rights, stating that "autonomy is the concrete expression of the exercise of the right to self-determination within the framework of membership in the national state." The accord also provided that land would be allocated to indigenous communities as the "material base of reproduction of a people." By 1996 the Zapatistas had reframed their political claims in terms of indigenous rights, vaulting the concerns of the poorest and most dispossessed segment of Mexican society to the center of Mexican political discourse.

This realignment, from peasant to indigenous identity, marked an important turning point for Mexican politics, one that would transform the scope and strategies of rural activists for at least the next decade. The emergence of the Mexican indigenous rights movement is best understood by situating the Zapatista uprising in the context of two shifting political landscapes. At the junction of the global and the local, indigenous politics emerged from the limits of peasant politics, under the weight of 500 years of exclusion and discrimination. It is this history that illuminates the moral force of indigenous peoples.

On June 17, 2002, the day the United States beat Mexico to proceed to the quarter-finals of the Soccer World Cup in Korea, and a bad day to be an American in Mexico, I was in the Chiapas state congress building in the state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez. I sat on a hard wooden pew in the hallway, waiting to interview Luis Hernández Cruz. He came up the stairs in animated conversation with other congressmen and aides and walked past me into his office. As his secretary explained who I was, he stepped back into the hall with a broad smile and ushered me into his sparsely furnished office. A ceiling fan squeaked listlessly above the desk, and he offered me a glass of water. We had a conversation about opening the window for the badly needed breeze, despite

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the deafening noise of schoolteachers protesting for union recognition in the plaza outside, using tin horns and drums as well as loudspeakers to make their case. As the tape of the interview attests, we left the window open.[2]

Luis Hernández Cruz was elected to the state Congress of Chiapas in October 2001, representing the twentieth district for the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). The twentieth district includes the municipalities of Las Margaritas, where he was born, La Independencia, and Maravilla Tenejapa. I was familiar with his political career and his reputation as a militant peasant activist in the 1980s. In office, he had staked out a position as an indigenous rights activist, a member of a loose caucus that crossed party lines to include the five or six other indigenous representatives to Congress. I had in mind to ask him some questions about the political trajectory of his life.

Luis Hernández Cruz was born in 1958. He attended school for two years before he was taken out of classes by his parents and put to work. At the age of seven he started to work in the fields, on various large privately owned *fincas* in Chiapas, and at thirteen he was sent to a ranch in the state of Veracruz, hundreds of miles to the northwest, where he cleaned out animal stalls. In 1974, when he was sixteen, Hernández decided to return to school. He had forgotten how to read and write, and he had never learned Spanish.

He finished primary school in two years, and then turned to the National Indigenous Institute (INI) for a course in *castellanización* – Spanish language instruction. By 1978, Hernández was working as a *castellanizador*, teaching Spanish and Mexican history and culture in a bilingual school in the community of Veinte de Noviembre in Chiapas.

Through his work as a teacher, Hernández joined the Independent Union of Agricultural Workers and Peasants (CIOAC) in 1980, leaving his job to take a full-time leadership position in CIOAC in

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all quotes and evidence in this section are from this interview with the author on June 17, 2002.

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1985. As he explained, "Seeing, as I did, and coming to understand, the plight, the needs, the injustices, the aggravation, and the lack of land of the indigenous communities, I left my job as a bilingual educator and dedicated myself full time to the struggle, to the organization of landless peasants." Hernández was one of the instigators behind a new strategy of land takeovers, in which hundreds of peasants were organized to occupy land in cases where petitions had languished for years without official action or response. In the first half of 1985, thousands of hectares of farm and ranch land were recovered through takeovers, and in August 1985 Hernández was arrested and imprisoned.

Hernández claims that when he was released in February 1986, he was better prepared, both emotionally and intellectually, for the struggle, having had the chance in prison to study Mexican law and to engage in discussion and debate with other political prisoners. Around this time he was involved in founding the Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM), which later became the Mexican Socialist Party (PMS). In November 1986, Hernández went to Havana, Cuba, where he attended a three-month course in philosophy, political economy, the workers' movement, the history of the Cuban Revolution, and Marxism-Leninism. Upon his return to Mexico, he continued to organize land takeovers, and in 1988 he was again arrested, this time for orchestrating a takeover on the ranch where he was born.

Hernández explains, "From that time on, I started to develop in that direction, using the language of workers, the proletariat. But for all of the activists and leaders in Mexico, in Chiapas, it was the same discourse: the system, the alternative, the socialist project, based on the example of the Soviet Union. This was the solution to poverty, misery, hunger. What's more, I remain convinced that the only alternative to resolve the inequalities and injustices of the world, and in this country, is a system of socialism." He was released within six months, and managed to stay out of jail until 1991. In the intervening years, he continued to organize land takeovers, protests, and marches, all centered around the demand for land, which he describes as the sole focus of peasant activism in those days.

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In 1992, however, the Mexican government reformed Article 27 of the Constitution, repealing the commitment to land redistribution that had linked the government and the peasantry since the time of the Revolution (1910–17). Hernández explained the implications of the reform with reference to Mexico's historical legacy: "Zapata fought for land, for the maintenance of communal property. With the reform of Article 27, the ideals of Zapata were buried." Although the government has framed privatization as a way of making land titles more secure for peasants, Hernández argues that privatization makes legal titling more secure for transnational corporations, allowing them to more easily penetrate and exploit indigenous land and resources.

CIOAC and other peasant organizations have resisted privatization, organizing local communities to refuse to sell communal property. Hernández insists that, as a result, the reform of Article 27 has had little actual effect in Chiapas and Oaxaca, where opposition to privatization has been well organized. In Las Margaritas, one of the municipal areas Hernández represents, 83 percent of the land was still communally held in 2002. In the northern states of Chihuahua and Sonora by contrast, privatization of communal land moved more quickly after 1992.

Notwithstanding their success in maintaining communal property, Hernández admits that "effectively, with the reform of Article 27, indigenous people and landless peasants were left without any legal instrument. Articles 18 and 21 of the Agrarian Reform Law established the possibility of forming agrarian committees, [with] presidents, secretaries, and treasurers who were legally empowered to submit land claims. Those rights are repealed – the right to form a committee, to get a hearing – with the reform of Article 27. Practically speaking, those rights disappear, which is why I say that the ideals of Zapata were buried."

Hernández dates the start of the indigenous struggle to 1989 and 1990. "In the 1960s, 1970s, one never spoke of indigenous peoples. One spoke of peasants, because nobody recognized the existence of

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the indigenous." As early as 1985, however, his brother Antonio Hernández Cruz and another activist, Margarito Ruiz, started the Independent Front of Indigenous Peoples (FIPI), an outgrowth of CIOAC with an explicitly indigenous orientation. In Chiapas, most people credit Ruiz with being the first to anticipate the potential force of an indigenous movement. He and his wife, Araceli Burguete, an anthropologist, were among the small group of six or seven people, mainly academics, who had helped to develop a model for indigenous self-government in Nicaragua, and attempted, in this period, to disseminate the idea in Mexico (Interview with Araceli Burguete, August 2000).

FIPI and CIOAC, the indigenous think tank and the peasant union, shared office space in the Chiapas city of Comitán in the mid-1980s. Relations between them, however, were strained. Many CIOAC activists (trained, like Luis Hernández, in Cuba) dismissed the political potential of an indigenous identity and criticized FIPI for lacking organizational and programmatic agendas. As both Antonio Hernández and Ruiz admit, the political impact and popular resonance of FIPI were practically nil in the 1980s (Interviews with Antonio Hernández Cruz, June 2002, and Margarito Ruiz, June 2002). Even Hernández's wife, a high-profile indigenous rights activist, former president of the National Plural Indigenous Assembly for Autonomy (ANIPA), and visible presence on the international indigenous rights circuit, laughs at the isolation and failure of those early years (Interview with Margarita Gutiérrez, May 2001). In retrospect, it is both amusing and ironic to them how alien the indigenous really was.

"But then," Hernández goes on, "you have the fall of socialism, at the global level, and the fall of the Soviet Union.... We still hold in our hearts and in our minds the belief that this project could rise again, but we also turned to other alternative types of politics to combat the problems facing indigenous people. And this is the alternative of autonomy and collective self-determination. To try to embed in the Constitution the rights of indigenous peoples, the practices of

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the communities, their *usos y costumbres*, their traditions, their own laws and forms of legal, economic, and social organization. This is what we came to understand."

Many indigenous rights activists identify the 1992 commemoration of the 500-year anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas as the catalyst of the indigenous movement in Latin America. In the early 1990s, Hernández began to take courses in indigenous rights and the protection of indigenous culture. He spoke to people he considered more experienced in the matter of indigenous politics, including the well-known Mexican anthropologist Hector Díaz Polanco, and he explored the possibilities of reconstituting the struggle in terms of indigenous rights. Hernández began to see his brother's work in a new light, and to reconsider the practical possibilities of an organization like FIPI. As he explains, "Well, so, now I am in another trench, working toward the incorporation of indigenous rights in local legislation, and also pressing for the recognition of the rights of the original inhabitants of this nation in the Constitution of the Republic. This is where I am now, but I come from this long and bitter history that I have told you about."

Like other indigenous activists the world over, Hernández puts faith in International Labor Organization Convention 169 (ILO 169), which guarantees the territorial and cultural rights of indigenous peoples. "Now, with the existence of these international conventions," he says, "we recognize the particularity of indigenous peoples." What is more, the Convention provides new political tools for Mexican activists. "Because the Mexican government has signed and ratified Convention 169, I develop my petitions on the basis of Articles 13 and 17 of the international Convention, because that is where you can find a reference to land and territory. More or less, this is where the legal framework of our rights is located. Because of the reform of Article 27, this international instrument is the only one left to us."[3]

[3] In September 2007 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by a vote of 143-4 with 11 abstentions. Mexico voted in favor of the Declaration.

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As the location and content of their rights have shifted, so have the strategies of opposition. As Hernández explained to me, "The proletarian struggle, the workers struggle, is one path, but the struggle of the indigenous peoples for autonomy and self-determination, that is another path. They are both about social justice, they come together, they reinforce one another." With a smile of patience he added, "The struggle is something one needs to search for; one needs to find the terms of struggle. *La lucha hay que buscarla*. There is no other way but to seek it out."

Indigenous political identity has also affected the scope of rural Mexican politics. Indigeneity multiplies potential oppositional alliances, linking the indigenous to the class-based left as well as to environmentalists, feminists, anarchists, nationalists, and others. As Hernández attests, indigenous identity expands the arena of contestation beyond the traditional left's narrower focus on distribution and material well-being. Demands for land and access to resources continue to animate contestation, but are reframed in terms of indigenous rights to autonomy, self-determination, and cultural reproduction. The demand for autonomy has been formulated in such a way that it is meant to confer the right to speak and learn indigenous languages, and to self-government according to traditional practices and customs, as well as a right to land and to such natural resources as petroleum, gas, minerals, and hydroelectric power. Although the Zapatista movement has lost its hold on the Mexican national conscience, even skeptics agree that the EZLN played an important role in ending more than 70 years of PRI one-party rule. It did so in part by multiplying the sites and terms of political contestation beyond state control, issuing new challenges to party legitimacy.

The transformation from peasant to indigenous political identity is not limited to Mexico. Over the course of the 1990s, the politics of indigenous rights developed traction all over Latin America (Brysk, 1994; Van Cott, 2000; Yashar, 1999, 2005). In South Asia, too, many people who were formerly peasants have come to identify themselves as indigenous peoples (Kingsbury, 1998, 2004; Tsing, 2005). The lists of

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participants at international indigenous rights conferences and meetings reveals that there is not a continent in the world, and hardly a country, that does not include groups staking a political claim on the basis of their indigenous identity. The United Nations designated the decade 1994–2004 the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People and agreed in 2005 to extend the commitment for a second decade.

Unlike peasant identity, which was primarily constituted at the national level, indigenous political identity has emerged in a dialogue between local and international activists, organizations, and ideas. The indigenous rights movement has been forged through transnational alliances built by activists who convene in Geneva, at the annual meeting of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York City, and at a host of smaller regional gatherings. Much of the international work of the indigenous rights movement has been focused on drafting such documents as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and on trying to persuade member states of the United Nations to support the Declaration. They seek to apply pressure to their own states through the international community and through organizations like the ILO, the OAS, and the UN, as well as to move beyond the boundaries of states that are increasingly circumscribed in their capacity to guarantee the rights of their own citizens to economic, social, and political security.

"The indigenous" is the most recent in a series of contentious group identities including, historically, "the people," "the proletariat," and "the peasant" that have been forged in different eras to expand popular participation in politics. "Indigenous" is the new "proletariat." Indigenous people sustain a powerful moral critique against neo-liberal globalization because they have been constructed as the literal corporeal embodiment of its antithesis. Indigenous identity is portrayed as ancient, communal, traditional, and moral, able to draw on a wealth of inherited wisdom to operate in organic sympathy with the earth and its natural resources. Globalization is its

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