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*Surveying the Silence*TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES,
INDIGENOUS RIGHTS, AND THE
STATE IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

For nearly two decades, leaders of the Zapatista social movement in Chiapas, Mexico, have claimed to speak on behalf of the region's disenfranchised rural dwellers. The Zapatistas, led by the ubiquitous and awe-inspiring Subcommander Marcos, have claimed to give voice to the voiceless. On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation declared war on the Mexican state, demanding radical class warfare (immediately) and pan-indigenous self-government and autonomy (eventually). This uprising was immediately met with violent suppression by Mexican authorities, but the Zapatistas have continued to be a force for political, economic, and social change in Chiapas.

Much has been written about the organization's violent beginning. Comparatively little has been written about the indigenous jungle dwellers in whose name the Zapatistas took up arms. This book gives these rural Chiapas residents voice, finally, through a comprehensive survey and case study. Among the questions addressed are: How many followers do the Zapatista leaders actually represent? How many of Chiapas' poor, dispossessed peasants actively participated in the Zapatista cause in the late 1990s? How many shared the movement's objectives but did not participate? How many opposed the armed rebellion in 1994? How many have lost faith in the succeeding years?

This book also uses the Zapatista movement as a model for refining a theoretical understanding of collective action. The failure of social movements and other expressions of collective action to reach their goal of social change is often blamed on the "free-rider" problem. Free-riders are people who agree with the movement's ends, but do not share leaders' zeal and believe they can remain on the sidelines and still reap the public benefits of a movement's eventual success. This theory was famously described

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00120-6 - Politics, Identity, and Mexico's Indigenous Rights Movements

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in the 1960s by the late Mancur Olson. In the case of the Zapatistas in southern Mexico, indigenous peasants who were presumed to sympathize with the movement for greater political autonomy and took no action have been characterized as free-riders. But even in the decade since the 1994 Chiapas uprising, little has been heard from these indigenous citizens who comprise the majority of Chiapas' rural residents. Indeed, their silence raises the question: does a pro-Zapatista silent majority, implied in much of the sympathetic academic literature, even exist?

Building on Olson's work, this book suggests that passive bystanders may sometimes actually be misrepresented by the movement leaders who claim to speak for them. José Antonio Lucero, writing about Andean indigenous rights movements in 2008 (19 – quoting Jenkins), asked “whether social movements constitute a direct [form] of representation resembling classic conceptions of participatory democracy, a device for representing the underrepresented and countering entrenched oligarchies, or an elite group of self-appointed advocates.” In Chiapas, for example, Zapatista leaders overstated the collectivist identity of indigenous residents, compromising, ironically, the very autonomy the Zapatistas said they were fighting to enhance. In this vein, our study of social movements may need to question leaders' presumed commitment to communitarian rights more closely. Exploring the ways that individuals' beliefs are subsumed by leaders' public discourse might reveal how silent majorities are manipulated by group leaders the world over and how social movements can undermine individual expression.

This book and the survey of indigenous public opinion on which it is based are intended, essentially, to audit three interrelated claims frequently made by the Zapatista leadership. First, Zapatista leaders assert they are supported by and speak for all of the indigenous people of Chiapas. Second, Zapatista leaders contend (for both political and ideological reasons) that indigenous Chiapanecans have a “communitarian” identity, meaning their primary definitions of self and self-interest are defined by their communal attachments and community's needs. Third, Zapatista leaders argue that they are the natural interpreters and representatives of this communitarian cultural frame.

In order to assess these claims, we conducted a survey of more than 2,000 indigenous and 3,000 non-indigenous Mexicans and performed in-depth case studies in two Mexican states. The survey was designed to measure respondents' level of support for communitarianism. For the sake of comparison and context, I surveyed residents in the states of

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Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Zacatecas. Chiapas and Oaxaca are both heavily indigenous and Mexico's most historically unequal states in terms of wealth distribution. Chiapas has a history of widespread repression of peasants, particularly indigenous peasants, by an oligarchy of governing *ladino* [non-Indian] elites. Oaxaca, by contrast, has a history of de facto indigenous autonomy going back centuries, and conflicts are more often between indigenous communities than between indigenous communities and the state. Zacatecas is a poor but non-indigenous state in northern Mexico and serves as a control case.

My central findings are provocative and tend to disprove the Zapatista leadership's claims about the indigenous people of Chiapas. (Detailed survey results are presented in Chapter 3.) With regard to the strength of their support, only some 15 percent of Chiapanecan respondents say they "trust" the Zapatistas, and the movement is trusted less than either the police or dominant political parties. Responses were similar in both Oaxaca and Zacatecas. With regard to the degree of communitarianism, interestingly, indigenous respondents articulate social values based on individual rights (rather than communitarian rights) perspectives to the same degree as non-indigenous respondents. By surveying the rural dwellers in Chiapas and Oaxaca, I am able to discern that whereas indigenous identity may have some effect on whether respondents are more communal-rights or individual-rights oriented, factors such as local land tenure institutions and political history have even more causal impact on respondents' world-views. Based on the survey data and case studies, I argue that indigenous Chiapanecans are neither lock-step communitarians as represented by Zapatista leaders nor liberals in the strictly Western tradition. As this book will show, they can adopt either of these positions, depending on the need. Moreover, I examine how misrepresentations by movement leaders of the indigenous population's views impacted Chiapanecans and how similar dynamics between leaders and their so-called followers are playing out in social movements throughout Latin America.

My findings regarding indigenous Chiapanecans' political and cultural identity speak to one of the central debates in contemporary social science scholarship: whether rights are afforded on a communitarian or individual basis. Pioneers of indigenous rights studies, including Van Cott (2000), Mattiace (2003), and Yashar (2005), argue that indigenous rights movements have been a refuge for communitarians in the post-Cold War era as "the idea of social rights was everywhere challenged by conservative politicians and neoliberal economists who successfully reframed it

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as an expensive and unsustainable entitlement rather than a fundamental right of the citizenry" (Yashar 2005, 47). By this argument, the international appeal of indigenous rights movements like the Zapatistas has been that they have reformulated the case for communitarian rights after the communist version was discredited by the implosion of the Soviet Union (Brysk 2000; Mattiace 2003; Plutarch 2004). The Soviet pursuit of group equality has been replaced by the Zapatista pursuit of group autonomy. This refashioning has made indigenous rights movements likewise acceptable to neoliberals, as long as the indigenous groups do not challenge the primacy of individual rights.

One of the first scholars to try to interpret the Zapatista movement was anthropologist Gary Gossen. His 1994 work took a steadfastly primordial view of ethnic identity, arguing identity is the result of ascriptive characteristics such as race and language. Gossen romanticized the Zapatista struggle as being the awakening of a new Mayan identity replete with a "distinctively Mesoamerican vision of self, society, and ethnic identity" (Gossen 1994, 568). In contrast, more subjectivist scholars (those who emphasize the malleability of identity) such as Higgins (2004), Stahler-Sholk (2007), and Jung (2008) view indigeneity as situational and post-modern, and argue that the Zapatistas' emphasis on identity politics and autonomy compliments traditional Marxist class-based identity. They write that this is 21st century movement in that it redefines rights, adopts new international electronic communications strategies, and situates oppressed groups in the world of flux wrought by globalization rather than in old materialist Marxist categories based on economic and social class. Indeed, this generation of constructivists (who view indigeneity as malleable, but within a finite domain) allowed for the possibility that citizens could identify as members of a particular group, like the Tzeltales or the Tzotziles, but without possessing the type of pan-indigenous identity the Zapatistas envisioned. The Zapatistas generally supported this broad pan-ethnic indigeneity even as regional and local leaders disaggregated this position into one of supporting only their linguistic or ethnic group.

Primordialist/essentialist views have dominated Chiapanecan studies for several generations. Starting with the fabled Harvard Project in the 1950s, hundreds of anthropology graduate students from the United States have been sent to document the "closed corporate communities" in Zinacantán in south central Chiapas on the premise that these communities foster strong, inward-looking collective cultures that protect them from cultural degradation by the outside world (Rus 2002). Corporate communities are,

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according to Wolf (2001, 156–158), peasant organizations which limit privileges to insiders and discourage member involvement in the outside community. This stylized ethnographic narrative, repeated in many dissertations in the 1970s and 1980s, presaged the Zapatistas' post-1996 emphasis on recognition of a communal ethnic identity rights. Zapatista leaders relied on this construct well after research had come out in the 1990s debunking the inward-looking-communities thesis in favor of one that recognized labor exploitation (even enslavement) and human rights abuses were the principal determinants of rural Chiapanecan identities (Rus 2002). Of course, as pointed out by Estrada Saavedra's ground-breaking research, the vast majority of scholarship on the Zapatistas has been polemical rather than objective (Estrada Saavedra 2007, 568). In the following section, we further explore the theoretical starting points of some of this literature.

*In the Name of Zapata or Jacinto Pérez?*¹

The Rural Class Cleavage and Zapatista Leaders, Followers, and Bystanders

The Zapatistas' "First Declaration," issued on January 1, 1994, was a call for revolutionary class warfare. Close observers have noted that ethnic identity was not originally part of the Zapatista discourse (Estrada Saavedra 2007; 386–388; Ruiz interview 2004; Mestries Benquet 2001, 139). Indeed, the geographical and membership restrictions posed by the movements' subsequent focus on indigenous rights have recently forced the group to return to its origins on the anti-capitalist left (Estrada Saavedra 2007, 599–601). Not only did the Zapatista insurgency originally ignore the plight of indigenous groups (in contrast to their initial attention to oppressed peasants), the Zapatistas and indigenous groups sometimes directly clashed over resources and the provision of social services. This was especially true where the Zapatistas conscripted livestock, resources, and people into their cause.

Evaluated as a class-based revolution, the Zapatistas failed. They did not break Chiapas' entrenched oligarchical elites. Similarly, as an

¹ Jacinto Pérez "Pajarito," a political leader in Chamula, Chiapas, led an important indigenous uprising against Chiapas' non-indigenous *ladino* elites in 1911. The followers of moderate General Venustiano Carranza, Mexico's eventual president after the constitutional convention, killed Pérez during the Mexican Revolution out of fear that he might incite further social upheaval. Other famous national leaders of indigenous movements whose names advocates might have chosen include colonial-era heroes Kanek and Moctezuma.

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ethnic movement, they did not obtain many real concessions to advance indigenous autonomy, rhetorical amendments to the Mexican Constitution notwithstanding. However, as an agrarian movement, they were wildly successful – much more successful than the Mexican Revolution or President Lázaro Cárdenas' game-changing land reforms way back in the 1930s. The post-1994 land redistributions by state and federal authorities reallocated more than 6 percent of the state's surface area from land-holding elites to squatters, Zapatistas, and other previously landless peasants, increasing the number of *ejidos* (public farm collectives) by more than 40 percent statewide (Chiapas State Government, Secretary for Rural Areas 2006). Chapter 4 details the story of that remarkable transformation from the perspective of the peasants who were involved.

A prominent Chiapas social movement leader whose main struggle was for land not ethnic recognition openly acknowledged “taking advantage of the Zapatistas' cover” after the 1994 insurgency and using the state government's fear of further instability to their own ends (Gómez Hernández 2004 interview). A 1992 amendment to Article 27 of the federal constitution had decreed that there would be no new land reform, only resolution of the thousands of pending land actions in Chiapas, which had the greatest backlog.² Another pressure valve was clearly needed. As the Zapatistas and the Mexican Army ceased hostilities in the spring of 1994, belligerent copycat groups sprung up around the state. Long-time petitioners for social change capitalized on the state government's sudden fear of instability and its willingness to bargain. These groups occupied private land and then persuaded the government to buy it from the private owners and donate it to the social movement squatters. The number of land invasions in Chiapas doubled from some 1,000 in 1994 to 2,000 in 1995 (Mattiace 2003). While indigenous rights and autonomy finally became headline issues during the San Andrés Dialogues (which resulted in a 1996 peace accord signed between the Zapatistas and President Ernesto Zedillo), demands made by a dozen outside groups helped ensure the creation of mechanisms for redistributing land.

Prior to 1994, the Chiapas State Legislature had tacitly encouraged social movements to mobilize and demand land reforms and measures to decrease political instability. Seasoned leaders on the political left lived by

² Although it contained only 3 percent of the national population, in the early 1990s Chiapas accounted for fully 25 percent of the federal government's caseload of unexecuted agrarian distribution claims (Monroy 1994, 18).

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this formula: “mobilization + storming of town halls = creation of an interim municipal council” (Eisenstadt 2004, 216). Essentially, well-focused political pressure yielded concessions. Squatters or others on the political left could march on town squares and either change who governed or receive concessions in exchange for ceasing their pressure tactics. Indeed, Araceli Burguete has shown that such overthrows of mayors and elected town councils happened in Chiapas scores of times. (Burguete 2006, 135–186, cites thirty-one cases of “decreed” mayoral changes within Chiapas’ 118 municipalities between 1996 and 2001 alone.)³

Before the Zapatista insurgency, government controlled the behavior of both agrarian elites and peasants. The peasants received direct subsistence aid from the government in exchange for their passivity and acceptance of authoritarian regimes and hierarchies defined in terms of land ownership. Consistent with the documented importance of “side payments” (Olson 1971), peasants were not usually offered group benefits; rather, the state coerced participation by granting individual rewards through group membership. Citizens who joined the state peasant union and its affiliated political party (the long-ruling Party of the Institutional Revolution, or PRI) received preferential access to fertilizers, farm machinery, other agrarian subsidies and inputs, and (in Chiapas) access to the all-important union-sponsored mechanisms to petition for land. In regards to this system, the Zapatistas did help end state corporatism in Chiapas. Of course, the 2000 gubernatorial victory by the first non-PRI candidate since before World War II, the economic crisis of the 1980s, and the agrarian crisis in the 1990s also had enormous impacts.

Corporatism in this context refers to the mechanisms of state control by manipulating support from interest groups. Inclusionary corporatism creates structures within the state that allow communitarian group interests to be represented. Exclusionary corporatism is also predicated on communitarianism, but seeks to consolidate political authority by co-opting and/or repressing opposing views rather than allowing them expression. In the case of Mexico, political control was exercised through exclusionary corporatism and coerced membership in government-sanctioned unions (Reyna and Wienert 1977, 161). To defuse class conflicts, the ruling class would accede to moderated versions of peasants’ and workers’ redistributive

³ In 1999, seven new municipalities were added in Chiapas, bringing the total to 118. Analysts Leyva and Burguete (2007) argue that the creation of new municipalities was part of the state’s counterinsurgency strategy to divide and conquer Zapatista-occupied areas.

Cambridge University Press

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demands. In the countryside, this meant rural residents were compelled to participate in local branches of the official peasants' union, and squatters were regularly co-opted by state governments through quiet backdoor land deals. Peasants who joined the union received carrots in the form of agricultural subsidies, social programs, and preferential treatment in applying for (although not necessarily receiving) land. Those who did not join the PRI-backed organizations got the stick of repression. Resisters were jailed without formal charges (often for months or even longer), and a few were even killed.

In this way, Mexico's federal and state governments fomented class identity at the expense of ethnic identity. No such rewards existed for identifying oneself as Indian. To the extent that indigenous groups were acknowledged at all, they were encouraged to assimilate into the *raza cosmica* [cosmic race] and subscribe to the myth of national unity that put Mexican nationalism above indigenous ethnic identities. In some ways, the PRI-dominated state succeeded in molding rural dwellers into corporate peasants. After all, these identities have withstood numerous efforts by indigenous rights activists to make ethnic identity more important than land tenure structures in determining how citizens see their relationship to the state and, more specifically, whether their rights are essentially individual or collective.

The survey data show that there is variation in levels of communitarianism among Mexican respondents: Chiapanecans express more strongly communitarian views than Oaxacans. But the differences do not correspond to a division between indigenous and non-indigenous citizens. Rather, the differences are best explained by variables relating to respondents' economic well-being, whether they live in rural areas, and, if they do, whether the dominant land tenure institutions are the state-penetrated *ejidos* of Chiapas or the more autonomous federally-recognized communal lands of Oaxaca. Stark differences between liberal pluralists and traditional communalists are apparent when latent attitude clusters are constructed (as described in Chapter 3). But, again, the distinctions are more the result of class rather than ethnicity.

According to this and other research, it seems that individuals consciously choose to prioritize their indigenous identity in some circumstances and class-based identity in others. Thus far, however, the process and mechanisms of how individuals make that decision have not been systematically drawn out. Most of the literature does not even differentiate among the various strategic considerations that inform individuals' decisions to adopt indigenous or peasant identities. Most existing literature, especially

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social movements literature, focuses on the consciousness-raising work activists undertake after they have established an indigenous collective identity rather than on the processes that leads people to prioritize one identity over another. This book offers a corrective. I will systematically examine individuals' attitudes and then discuss how these views aggregated into a social movement, instead of making inferences about individuals' attitudes by disaggregating group outcomes.

Differentiating Individual and Communitarian Citizenship Rights

In the context of southern Mexico in the late 20th century, the demand for indigenous rights was basically synonymous with a demand for communitarian rights. As per Adelfo Regino Montes, an Oaxacan Mixe intellectual, "It is important to recall that before the arrival of the Spanish the collectivities present in these lands were peoples, with their own culture and social, political, economic, and judicial institutions.... They believed, as some continue to affirm today, that these categories and concepts should impose themselves on the essence of things" (Regino Montes 1996). His argument to the National Indigenous Forum, based on this strong concept of collective rights, was that "the recognition of our collective rights is necessary so that we can truly enjoy our individual rights" (Regino Montes "Taller 2 – Libre Determinación de los Pueblos Indígenas" n.d.). Regino Montes attended that summit to defend Oaxaca's de facto autonomy and argue for its enhancement, and his approach was characteristically Oaxacan. While they participated actively in the Zapatista-facilitated debate over autonomy, the Oaxacan delegation advocated gradualism where the Zapatistas of Chiapas pushed for more radical and urgent action.

The essence of Zapatista communitarianism can be understood from reading the group's statement on autonomy presented at the National Indigenous Forum:

We are peoples, not ethnics or populations; by recognizing us thusly, with the collective rights which correspond to us for our difference, conditions are created for us to enjoy all the rights and liberties which correspond to us as people.... We do not ask anyone to grant us this autonomy. We have possessed it and continue to do so.... But we have not been able to fully exercise this liberty, not in colonial times nor in independent Mexico. We have always had to do it [exercise these rights] against everything and against everyone, in a long struggle of resistance. (National Indigenous Forum 1996, 1)

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Although a more communitarian flag would be difficult to raise, even in this statement the Zapatistas recognized the need for recognition of individual rights. But to the Zapatista polemicists at the National Indigenous Forum, individual and collective rights were not coequal. Collective rights precede individual rights; individual rights extend from collective rights. This concept of the relationship between an individual and the collective is fundamentally different from the Western concept of citizenship rights as born out of the Enlightenment and French Revolution.

Both the role of the state and the role of the citizen are vastly different in communitarian versus liberal societies. Deborah Yashar developed four heuristic definitions of citizenship⁴ in her 2005 exploration of ethnic identities and political contestation. She concluded that the form and content of participation must be considered alongside the rules that determine who actually qualifies for citizenship. According to Yashar, political participation is itself a product of interest intermediation. She argues, therefore, that access to political associational space and pre-existing political networks determine whether citizenship in a given nation assumes an ethnic dimension. For Yashar, the issue becomes one of identifying whether individuals (as in pluralist models) or groups (as in corporatist and consociational models) are privileged:

Liberalism ... is an individual affair. Rights and responsibilities inhere in the individual. And it is the individual who relates to and is regulated by the state. Ethnicity and multiculturalism are irrelevant to a discussion of citizenship and the formal mechanisms of interest intermediation.... But citizenship has obviously not been confined theoretically or empirically to a set of individual rights and responsibilities. Groups have also assumed a formal role in defining some state-society relations.... Indeed, communitarians argue that identities, interests, preferences, meanings, and capacities are socially constructed and are rooted in communities. (Yashar 2005, 43)

The implications of these divergent worldviews are dramatic. For liberals, the individual is primary, and the state exists to protect its citizens from encroachment on their individual liberties. Such liberal republicanism is best exemplified by the French Revolution's Declaration of

⁴ These four principles are: the "Aristotelian ideal," or according such rights to all who can reason and interpret the community's general will; *jus sanguinis*, which grants citizenship based strictly on "bloodlines" and kinship; *jus soli*, the standard territorially-based means of granting citizenship to all who reside in a geographic area; and a universal or open borders approach that accords citizenship to everyone, as per the United Nations (Yashar 2005, 36–39).