

Reviews

Chiapas: Interpretaciones sobre la negociación y la paz

(Chiapas: Interpretations about the Negotiations and Peace)

Cynthia Arnson, Raúl Benítez Manaut and Andrew Selee, eds.
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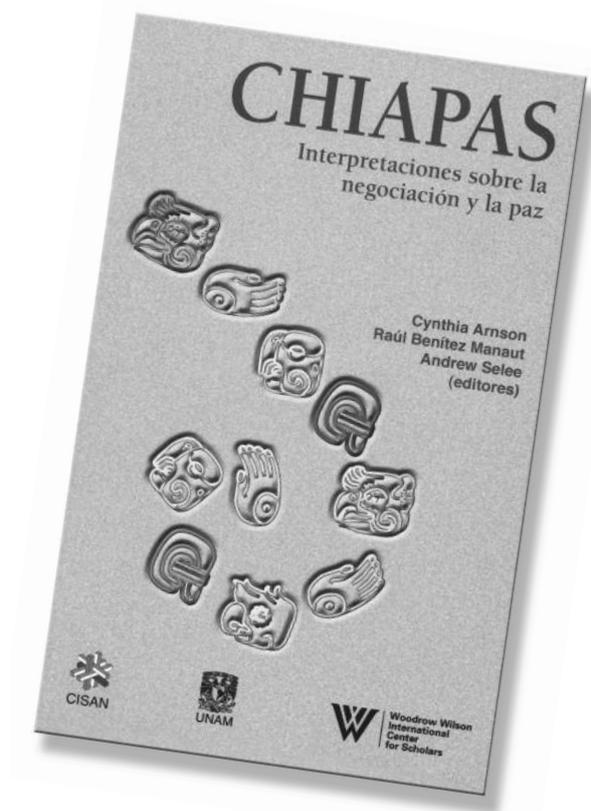
January 1, 2004 was the tenth anniversary of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, a movement which initially shook up national and international public opinion given that it coincided with the North American Free Trade Agreement coming into effect and the shattering of the idea that Mexico was rapidly becoming part of the first world, evidencing the serious social, economic and political problems plaguing the country.

After 10 years, the international, national and local contexts have changed enormously, with the continual transformation of the actors involved; the Chiapas conflict is more political than military, and peace negotiations have stagnated.

One of the main implications for the Chiapas problem has been alternation in office in both Mexico as a country and Chiapas state, creating both high expectations and costly disillusionment, as well as the local impact of the swift changes globally. Another factor that explains the Chiapas crisis is the inability of the main actors (the federal administrations, the Zapatista National Liberation Army [EZLN] and even the peace negotiators) to find alternatives for the stymied negotiations.

The book *Chiapas: interpretaciones sobre la negociación y la paz* (Chiapas: Interpretations about the Negotiations and Peace), then, is a serious international academic effort to portray the stagnation of the conflict and its causes as well as analyze the prospects for opening up negotiations through an agile, plural structure that would reflect the different national positions on the problem, even though its conclusions are not particularly optimistic.

In the chapter interpreting the conflict, the book's editors, Cynthia Arnson, Raúl Benítez and Andrew Selee, summarize the debate about the peace talks, defending the hypothesis that there is a state of "armed peace," comparing the negotiations in Chiapas with others that have taken place in Latin America, mainly in Central America. The editors maintain that



political will to participate in negotiations is required on the part of the actors in the conflict and that everyone should change their all-or-nothing positions in order to achieve a stable peace and find a solution in which everyone—but mainly the indigenous communities—could benefit. As long as this does not happen, there will continue to be a profound deterioration of Chiapas society, which could have repercussions nationwide.

The main contributions come from two central actors in the mediation process: Monsignor Samuel Ruiz, bishop emeritus of the diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, who characterizes the situation as a "formal impasse with real deterioration"; and Luis H. Álvarez, the Mexican government's coordinator for dialogue and negotiation in Chiapas, who situates the conflict with the EZLN in a broader framework of social problems that have gone into crisis in Chiapas. These opinions are supplemented by an article by Emilio Zebadúa, former minister of the interior of Chiapas, who reflects on the national nature of the conflict, drawing a balance sheet

about the need to deepen the positive changes in local politics, such as the condemnation and prosecution of paramilitary groups, but also to fight federal government economic and political restrictions on the local government. The second part of the book goes into an enriching comparative analysis of other international experiences of indigenous demands and rights: here, Will Kymlicka analyzes the experiences of autonomy in Canada and New Zealand; Donna Lee Van Cott, refers to the cases of Nicaragua and Panama; Álvaro Pop contributes the experiences of Guatemala's Maya Q'eqchi' Movement; and Guillermo May, a member of the National Indigenous Congress, represents the Mexican indigenous perspective.

Later in the book, other authors look at the structural roots of the Chiapas conflict: Natividad Gutiérrez Chong warns of the need to give more power to indigenous leaders in order to have grassroots spokespersons to dialogue with instead of continuing to accept "interpretations" by mestizo intellectuals. Olivia Gall puts the accent on racism as a historical cross-cutting theme in Chiapas social relations, and the problems encountered in trying to overcome it. Gonzalo Ituarte describes the precarious living conditions of Chiapas indigenous people and the contradictions in federal government policies. And lastly, Guillermo Trejo emphasizes the "changing nature" of the Chiapas conflict, maintaining that, while consolidating its social base, the EZLN is waiting for a change in national political conditions to seek options in negotiations. The last part of the book studies the conditions that would create alternatives for reopening peace negotiations. Miguel Concha deals with the need to see indigenous peoples as subjects of collective rights, which would imply a drastic change in the conception of the nation-state today. Luis Hernández Navarro observes the present federal administration's lack of political capability and the limited institutional channels for a negotiated settlement. Rodolfo Stavenhagen situates the

current state of the conflict as part of the Mexican state's incomplete political transition due to the constitutional reforms not moving forward to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples, a basic precondition for finding ways out in the negotiations. Miguel Álvarez Gándara presents a comprehensive analysis of the conflict, the actors and the lack of conditions for achieving an integral peace, understood as the opening up of institutional channels to fight poverty, discrimination and inequality for indigenous peoples, the structural causes of the insurrection, and the need to change the government's neoliberal policy.

In conclusion, opening up a negotiations process that would build institutional channels aimed at a long term, profound solution to backwardness, marginalization and poverty in indigenous communities is urgently needed. In other words, as the book's authors point out, the Mexican state must be substantially reformed to turn the indigenous communities (who now represent 10 percent of the national population) into full participants, recognizing their history, social and cultural diversity. The solutions to their problems cannot continue to be postponed without running the risk of prolonging the rebellion.

The solution to the Chiapas conflict is an opportunity for the Mexican government to find ways forward to make sure that the recent political change involves the entire population, thus moving ahead in the transition to democracy. Otherwise, as long as this solution is postponed, Mexico's democracy will continue to be incomplete; thus, the future of Chiapas is linked to the integral reform of the Mexican state if it ever happens.

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