

Chiapas: the apogee of contradictions

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On February 9, facing the TV cameras, President Ernesto Zedillo declared war, albeit in other words, on the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and its leader, *Subcomandante Marcos*, whose identity he “unmasked.” The finger is pointed at Rafael Guillén Vicente, a B.A. in philosophy who had for a period of time worked as a professor at the Metropolitan University’s Xochimilco

campus and is said to have been a member of the Forces of National Liberation. According to the president, the EZLN was preparing to provoke the destabilization of Mexico, a charge demonstrated by displaying the not very powerful arsenals located in three safe houses —one of which held two revolvers.

The Ministry of Interior (*Gobernación*) also reported more than 110 denunciations made by the civilian population from January to September 1994, including the takeover of towns, murders, the looting of

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Marco A. Cruz/Imagenlatina.

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businesses, kidnappings, highway robbery, cattle rustling, the forcible (sic) recruitment of Indians and peasants, the purchase of arms with resources from the government's Solidarity and farmer aid programs, robbery, assault and rapes of the civilian population.... The strange thing is that, despite the foregoing, two Presidents of the Republic have used the word "dissidents" to refer to those who (suddenly) are now delinquents, and that they sent former Mexico City regent Manuel Camacho and the present Minister of the Interior, Esteban Moctezuma, to talk to them.

On the 9th of February twelve arrest warrants were issued, and the federal Attorney General hastened to carry them out in Chiapas, accompanied by an enormous deployment of the federal army. Marcos was not arrested, but alleged members of his group were; the foreign and international press, as well as the International Red Cross, were forbidden access to the territory recovered by the army. The government-line media jump with McCarthyite joy. And, again immediately, there is a widespread critical response: the arsenals—the conclusive evidence—turn out not to prove as much as was hoped; Marcos' escape increases his popularity; and indignation is spurred by denunciations of torture, proven in several cases by the press and Amnesty International.

The much-feared polarization has begun to occur. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) organizes demonstrations with obligatory attendance [known as *acarreo* in Mexico] in the states of Veracruz and Puebla, and at the Olympic Pool; Salinas-line intellectuals use their full repertoire of insults against the subversives; a sector of the Catholic Church seizes the opportunity to attack Samuel Ruiz (notably Bishop Juan Sandoval Iñiguez of Guadalajara and Bishop Emeritus Genaro Alamilla of Papantla). But the majority of public opinion has mobilized against the decision: there have been marches in several states, hundreds of articles and letters to the press, calls to radio stations, protest manifestos from university faculties, intellectuals, political groups, non-governmental organizations. One manifesto from intellectuals gathered over 700 signatures.

The government contradicts itself, issues corrections, denies the corrections, contradicts itself again, observes the fearsome fall of the stock market. Disinformation is taken to extremes, while many, frightened by both sides' violence or simply misinformed, avoid expressing any opinion at all. And support for the president is, in the best analysis, precarious. His measures gratify those who called for taking a hard line, and alienate the rest. Nobody denies

the need for a single national territory, but why is it that for thirteen months no one noticed the anomalies of the situation, which President Zedillo called an "abdication of sovereignty," a punishable act which the previous government overlooked?

Another error of calculation, with enormous international repercussions, was the sudden characterization of Marcos as a criminal and terrorist, which goes together with denial that the EZLN represents an "Indian rebellion." But Marcos is not some discredited *cacique* [traditional local boss] like oil-workers' leader Joaquín Hernández Galicia, whom the Salinas government was able to imprison to widespread applause. Marcos, if we go by the résumé the government is disseminating, is a radical intellectual who chose the path of armed struggle. And many of us who neither share that choice nor consider it viable feel enormously indignant when we see how, in order to "arrest twelve people," Chiapas is militarized, and then the government reverses itself, only to reconsider again immediately thereafter, and so on successively. Who believes in all this; who puts their trust in this sort of thing? Nothing could be more laughable than Chiapas Governor Eduardo Robledo's request to be granted a "leave" from office (a political cadaver as a posthumous gift to the Zapatistas), despite federal promises to respect the sovereignty of the states. And the support that is obtained dissolves into smoke. On February 14 the president stated: "Today I am issuing precise instructions to the Attorney General's office and the army that they not undertake any actions which could provoke confrontations." In other words, that nobody be arrested.

In this context it's worth recalling the obvious: in Mexico there are many societies, there is no such thing as *the* society; and this diversification (fragmentation) is aggravated by the accumulation of too many urgent situations in a short period of time, at a mind-numbing velocity. On February 9 one sector of opinion reacted to the new hard line by expressing enthusiasm for the president's *muchos pantalones*,¹ viewing the attacks as a staunch defense of the interests of the bourgeoisie and landowners. Another, very broad sector acknowledged the EZLN's motives and expressed concern over treatment of the detainees and the fate facing Marcos. Yet another sector watched the whole thing as if it were a show. Subsequently, for different reasons, everyone reacted critically, the

¹ This is a macho expression roughly equivalent to "having a lot of guts." (Editor's note.)

government having isolated itself once again. And all sectors avidly follow the latest news to get a glimpse of the day's contradictions, ambiguities and obfuscations.

Among the latest news: the president is no longer surrounded by the aura of "presidentialism," yet the government still bases itself on the conditioned reflexes of authoritarianism; public opinion and civil society (which are never the same thing) have become more vigorous and sharpened their memory. And the "unmasking" of Marcos has neither removed nor diminished that name. Whatever his identity was before December 31, 1993, since New Year's Day of 1994 *Marcos* is a different reality, both politically and psychologically. He is no longer a linear creature of his past, since he does not carry that past with him when he faces the communications media. And this makes Marcos completely different from Rafael Guillén, who is a person with a name, family, academic record and clandestine life. The ski mask is the radical separation which, as paradoxically as you like, makes Marcos a distinct personality, untrammelled by the discourse of the guerrillaist left, without the obligation to be orthodox. And that which arises from this, a leader who has no face but does speak with eloquence, creates — through letters, manifestos, proclamations and his characteristic "P.S.'s" — an unexpected dialogue with Mexican society and, to a certain extent, international society as well.

Fin de siècle turnarounds: a clandestine group with a very routine schema generates a leader who mixes elements from his original training with those provided by his immersion in the Indian world. The dogmatic Marxist Marcos turns out also to be an imaginative masked man who eloquently unveils the extremes of marginalization. Moreover, other elements unexpectedly manifest themselves in the literature he produces: Aztec and Maya culture, Biblical echoes, a sense of humor — all of which dilute the denseness of sectarianism and lend diversity to the messianic. Small-group origins are neutralized thanks to the weight of reality itself.

Everything goes by color

There are innumerable versions of what has occurred. The leader of the National Action Party (PAN), Carlos Castillo Peraza, explains his position as follows:

In January 1994 the Mexican government faced an alternative: either accept a formal declaration of war, followed by a real assault, or state that those who made this declaration are criminals.

It did not dare to do either of these things, since it was inhibited by its own responsibility, its own guilt in causing the conflict. This continued for a year, and

nothing could be done about it. Finally an Attorney General [PAN member Antonio Lozano Gracia], who shares no previous guilt regarding the Chiapas conflict, takes the path of legality, beginning to rebuild the state of law.

In its own way, the idea is a formidable one: a government whose own past conduct frightens it to the degree of paralysis, and an Attorney General who tosses the indecisiveness of two presidents into the garbage can, thereby providing the nation with a lesson in courage. The PAN, savior of the Republic. Without consulting Zedillo, who is asphyxiated by his past sins — among them having granted some credit to the "dissidents" — Lozano begins anew, on his own hook and due to his own guts, the reconstruction of the State of Law. Is there any point in explaining that Lozano took no initiative whatsoever and that his only role was to put into effect, in true McCarthyite spirit, the government's monumental mistake? Here party politics, the search for partisan profit from any and all situations, turns truly pathetic. Neither is it the case that the Zapatistas canceled the State of Law in Chiapas, which had been abolished long before. What did it was the conjunction of PRI politicians, cattle ranchers, landowners, judges and corrupt judicial police. In the face of all this the mere extermination of the EZLN, demanded by the pleiad headed by Fidel Velázquez [leader of the pro-government labor federation], becomes the least effective formula of all.

And the issue is complicated by the economic catastrophe which envelops everything and intensifies the climate of exasperation and injustice. Not that anything would be required to irritate the "authentic San Cristobalians," those members of "Good Society" (if they are members of any at all) who attacked Bishop Samuel Ruiz and the offices of his Diocese in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. What we're dealing with here is anything but the sort of anti-clerical mobilizations seen in our historical past; instead these are practicing, even fanatical, Catholics, who put aside their age-old respect for the Church and insult one of its dignitaries, in the certainty that they are doing the right thing. And on the following day they receive approbation for their actions in the statements of those bishops who denigrate Samuel Ruiz with all political and theological fury.

Meanwhile, broad sectors of society demand that peace talks be started up again. The financial catastrophe is growing; the hard-liners are smiling, convinced that the most important thing is to liquidate civil society. As for the economy, they assure us, the strong will survive and that is what's most important ❧