TRANSLATING INDIAN RESISTANCE: THE URBAN APPROPRIATION OF ZAPATISTA POLITICAL THOUGHT IN MEXICO CITY

Kara Zugman
UC Faculty Fellow Researcher
UCSC

Working Paper No. 37
Chicano/Latino Research Center

May 2003

Chicano/Latino Research Center
1156 High Street
Merrill College
University of California
Santa Cruz, CA. 95064

Do not cite or quote without Permission.
TRANSLATING INDIAN RESISTANCE:

The Urban Appropriation of Zapatista Thought in Mexico City

Kara Zugman PhD

ABSTRACT

This paper\(^1\) explores the relationship of race and ethnicity with revolution and social change in the post cold war era. The case of the EZLN and their relationship with their civil urban activist-supporters in Mexico City will highlight how Mayan political discourse inflected in Zapatismo and has breathed new life into modern concepts like democracy and the nation and invigorated urban social movements in their attempt to construct a new political culture in Mexico. Using interview and observation data gathered between 1999-2000, I show how urban activists in Mexico City have appropriated and re-articulated "selected traditions" of indigenous political ideas in this process. The goal of this paper is to open up a debate about the role of ethnicity, race, and cultural politics and its relationship to social change in the age of globalization.

Mexico had never seen a great revolution, only rehearsals for the greatest uprising....

--Source? (290).

La Escapía had felt it. A flash! A sudden boom! This old white-man philosopher had something to say about the greed and cruelty. For La Escapia it had been the first time a white man ever made sense. For hundreds of years, white men had been telling the people of the Americas to forget the past; but now the white man Marx came along and he was telling people to remember. The old-time people had believed the same thing: they must reckon with the past because within it lays

\(^1\) This paper is based on my dissertation "Mexican Awakening in Postcolonial America: Zapatistas in Urban Spaces in Mexico City," UC Santa Barbara June 2001 in the Department of Sociology. I conducted two years of fieldwork during the summers of 1997, 1998 and from August 2000 to April 2001, I conducted in-depth structured and unstructured interviews with 60 members of the EZLN and 20 members of other social movements including the Urban Popular Movement, Neighborhood Assembly (AB), Frente Popular Francisco Villa (FPFV), Popular Revolutionary Union Emiliano Zapata (UPREZ), and Unitary Center for Workers (CUT). I interviewed members of non-governmental organizations, Civic Alliance and members of Citizen's Movement for Democracy as well as the Democratic Convergence. I interviewed activists in the union movement including (SME), the Mexican electrical worker's union, and RUTA 100, the bus driver's union. I interviewed members of the university student strike committee, the General Strike Council (CGH) and members and activists of the Zapatista Coordinadors, which are newly formed support networks for the EZLN's national political initiatives such as the 1999 Referendum on Indigenous Rights and Culture and the EZLN General Command's March to the Mexican Congress in Mexico City in March 2001. My methodology also consists of discourse analysis based on the work of Stuart Hall, VN Voloshinov and it is also influenced by the work of Walter Mignolo and his notions of "colonial difference" and "border thinking."
seeds of the present and the future. The must reckon with the past because within it lay this present moment and also the future moment—(31).

—From *Almanac of the Dead: A Novel* by Leslie Marmon Silko (31).

Introduction: Looking Backward at the 1990s.

The end of the cold war brought confusion and bewilderment to the left around the world. Few were expecting the demise of the Soviet bloc and the freedom movements demanding democracy in Eastern Europe. Even more perplexing was the sudden end of long-standing horrific low intensity wars that suddenly came to an end. Peace Accords were signed in El Salvador and in the Middle East. Truth Commissions were carried out in Guatemala and South Africa. Perpetrators of crime were being brought to justice. Elections were going to be the wave of the future if the left was going to survive. While Nelson Mandela won the presidency of South Africa, the Sandinistas lost the elections in Nicaragua, as did most left parties around the world. It seemed that the left was having the rug pulled out from under them either through peace accords or lost elections.

Before the much-hyped notion of “globalization” became the dominant framework for understanding the state of the world, the ideological groundwork was being laid for George Bush Sr.’s “new world order.” The values of human rights, democracy, and the rights of minorities, once the banners under which the left organized, were quickly becoming the ideological backdrop for U.S. military intervention. And while his election gave many a liberal baby boomer a boost, Bill Clinton was bombing Iraq before he could stop singing “Don’t Stop Thinking About Tomorrow!” It is in this incredibly confusing context, which emerged one spectacular moment that broke through the dominant ideological discourse of the triumph of democracy and
globalization. In Mexico, a country where Indians officially didn’t exist except in
museums\(^1\) and where a tense but friendly relationship existed with its colossal neighbor, a
rebel uprising was not only unexpected but sent shock waves through both the Mexican
state and Wall Street. No, in contrast to Jorge Castañeda’s precipitous proclamation,
utopia, indeed, was not unarmed (1993).

The EZLN’s (Zapatista National Liberation Army) emergence on the national and
international stage on the day that the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement)
was to go into effect January 1, 1994 challenged the assumption that the post cold war era
would be the end of the left and the end of revolution. At the same time, it has challenged
us to rethink the relationship between ethnicity, race, social class, and political identity.
That is, who is the “subject” of social change? After all, it was not just bankers and
government officials who believed that this insurgency must have been directed from the
outside (Guatemalan guerrillas for example), most of the left believed this to be true as
well.

Zapatismo as a discourse and political practice has many mothers, such as urban
Maoism, Guevarism, liberation theology, and Mayan political discourse. However, it is
the Indian element that has had the most impact in terms of creating effective links with
urban Mexico and creating new meanings out of these well worn modern concepts. In
this essay, I draw on those elements to make this point by describing the EZLN’s
relationship to urban movements and the development of new urban politics inspired by

\(^{2}\) Luis Hernández Navarro writes that “mexican elites have been obsessed with assimilating indians since
1824 emphasizing a modern national unity at the expense of cultural difference...the 1917 constitution did
not include indigenous peoples, but homogenization led to exclusion and discrimination and exploitation
“Indian were condemned either to disappear as such or to live lives of pretense and deception.” [Where
does this quote end? Is the following section part of the same footnote?] 1992 constitutional reform of article 4 of constitution makes reference to the pluriethnic Mexican state but
doesn’t say anything about how to institutionalize those rights (1999c).
the EZLN organizing methods based on “received” and “decoded” (Cruz and Lewis 1994; Hall 1980) interpretations of indigenous political culture. Lastly, I argue that “racial/ethnic” politics in urban Mexico has been impacted by the EZLN on two different but interrelated registers. First, a number of urban Zapatista supporters have gained a newly heightened race consciousness. That is, they are more likely to speak of themselves in racial terms as having indigenous roots, especially among the urban poor. Secondly, the EZLN inflections on ideas like the individual, democracy, and the nation has inspired the imagination of urban Mexican activists to practice their politics in a distinct manner.

A few explanations are in order here. First, the encoding/decoding model elaborated by Stuart Hall (1980) was specifically focused on the production of cultural signs through mass media. This theory examined how audiences developed “multiple readings” of the same cultural signs that were “encoded” with intended meanings by their producers. In this same vein, I argue that the Zapatista movement consciously sends out messages inflected with “selected traditions” of indigenous culture (Hobsbawn 1983). Signs, like identities, (since our identities are formed through language) can only be understood as social products (Voloshinov 1986). In a dialectical process these signs “reflect and refract” the relations of production. Signs are in part a product of historic social struggles and in part of the consciousness of the individual speaking subject. Multi-accentuality is a way to understand the multiple meanings that signs have. Every social agent, as a member of a social class or (or in my appropriation of this theory, racial, sexual, and national groups) puts a unique accent on a concept or sign in an attempt to infuse the sign with the subject’s desired meaning. This is the framework
from which I understand how urban actors have received, understood, and re-appropriated “indigenous culture” manifested in *neozapatismo*. That is, these urban actors that I interviewed, even when they have traveled to Chiapas to visit Zapatista indigenous communities, do not receive a “idealized authentic culture” which can be transported and translated unproblematically to another social arena such as Mexico City. Rather, they are participating in an ongoing process of articulating their identities as Mexicans as they attempt to redefine their relationship to the Indian “other,” just as indigenous people themselves are in a process of re-articulating their history and culture through the “innovation of tradition” (Hernández Navarro 1999). This process is hardly seamless or unproblematic. It is full of conflict and contradiction. Indigenous peoples have been in constant struggle to maintain their culture against direct intervention by first the Spanish colonizers, criollo elites and then by the constant surveillance and intervention of the Mexican state. In order to clarify what I am referring to when discussing “indigenous culture,” the following section will explain how I am using the term “indigenous culture.”

Who is the “Indian” in Mexico Today?

The cultural sign “Indian” was created largely by Spanish colonization. Indeed, the term “Indian” was itself a “misrecognition” as the first explorers did not know they had landed in the Américas. What are referred to as ‘Indian’ people had a specific socio-political organization prior to colonization that bears little resemblance to the social structure under which most indigenous communities live today. For the Spanish colonizers, the organization and exploitation indigenous labor framed the crown’s
policies toward the Indians. Indigenous ethnic and political identities were completely
and violently re-organized in order to 1. Extract maximum surplus value from indigenous
labor, and 2. As a form of social control (Saldaña-Portillo 2002; Diaz Polanco 1997).
This violent re-ordering of indigenous social life was achieved through the breaking
down of formerly regional political and ethnic identities and turning them into discrete
and self enclosed (what anthropologists call ‘corporate communities’). Los reducciones
(the reductions) concentrated dispersed indigenous people into fabricated “Indian towns”
each with their own style of dress and customs (Diaz Polanco 1997:54-5). So all
“Indians” were regarded as the same, but actually they were congregated into disparate
communities, each with their own “usos y costumbres” (uses and customs) and styles of
dress. Over the years as the old indigenous identities were broken down, new resistant
ones emerged, paradoxically, through the “colonial techniques of governmentality”
(Saldaña-Portillo 2002:290). During the independence struggle, criollo elites made
constant reference to Aztec resistance against the Spanish crown, as did those who fought
in the Mexican Revolution.

In post Revolutionary Mexico, government policy towards these “corporate
communities” vacillated between co-optation and coercion. Specifically, in Chiapas,
corporate indigenous communities had guarded themselves against outside influence for
years. The Cardenista indigenista officials sought to both control and to reorganize
Indian labor as well as alleviate the worse excesses of ladino landowner exploitation of
the Indians (Rus 1994). So when we discuss how the EZLN appropriates and re-
articulates “indigenous culture,” it is not a pure “authentic” culture as opposed to the
phony colonial creation, the “Indian towns.” Rather, it is precisely this product of
“colonial difference” (Mignolo 2000) that the Zapatistas recuperated. As Saldaña-Portillo writes, “here, the EZLN returned to that that colonial creation-the town council and revalued it, emphasizing its democratic potential, restressing the importance of town meetings and consensus as the basis for town council forms of governance” (2002: 296). What is considered to be “Indian” today in Mexico is a colonial creation, but it is also the product of indigenous peoples’ historical anti-colonial resistance and struggle.

The Dawn of a New Mexico

The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) is considered by many the first revolutionary movement of the Twenty First Century. With an innovative mix of Mayan political traditions and direct democracy influenced by urban Mexican activists, the Zapatistas have given new life to traditional modern concepts such as democracy, the individual, and the nation (Carlsen 1999). With the legacy of 2,000 years of Mayan civilization, the indigenous “accents” on these modern concepts have provided a legitimacy for the construction of new political spaces and subjectivities for a Mexican populace wearied by a 72-year-old authoritarian one party regime and now a more democratic yet thoroughly neo-liberal one under President Vicente Fox. For many, Zapatismo is still the most important moral political force in Mexico today and is indicative of the new kinds of political movements that we are likely to see in the next century.

Since emerging onto the stage of national politics on January 1, 1994, the EZLN has profoundly affected Mexican politics with its call for respect for indigenous rights and autonomy and greater democracy (LeBot 1997). Most of the scholarly work on the
Zapatista movement focuses on the movement in Chiapas (Collier and Quaratiello 1995; Montemayor 1996). Others describe about the new innovative forms of democratic organizing that the Zapatista movement brought to Indian communities in Chiapas (Harvey 1998; Gilly 1998). Some, like anthropologist Gary Gossen, examine the cultural elements that make Zapatismo a distinctly Mayan movement (Gossen 1999).

In this article, I explore the “selective traditions” of indigenous political culture present in Zapatista discourse. As Luis Hernández Navarro has stated, "Recuperating tradition and innovation of it are not contradictory terms, but part of the same process of recognition and construction of identities" (Hernández Navarro 1999:75). I also demonstrate through data gained from urban activists influenced by the Zapatistas how these new ideas are contributing to “new political spaces” in Mexican society. Zapatismo is a multi-vocal discourse that appropriates selected and re-articulated Mayan political ideas as well as concepts derived from urban forms of direct democracy (Interview with Carlsen 1999). Here I will attempt to tease out some of the indigenous concepts and demonstrate the way these ideas are received, de-coded and re-articulated by urban Mexicans since 1994. It will also show how these concepts challenge and shift the meaning of modern concepts of democracy, the individual, justice, and the nation.

Much has been written about Zapatista indigenous political discourse (Díaz Polanco 1997; Lebot 1997). However, little has been written on its impact on political identity formation in urban Mexico. In order to understand this impact, it is necessary to step back and analyze how these indigenous political concepts are received and understood by urban Mexican activists and how these re-readings of indigenous political culture contribute to the building these new political practices. While many political
movements, such as the NGOs, attempt to fight corruption and what is deemed by the
Zapatistas to be the “old political culture,” these groups do not generally have the ability
to effectively challenge these practices. In contrast, the Mayan political discourse present
in Zapatismo offers a new legitimacy for doing politics differently (Street 1996). As
stated earlier, the cultural sign of Indian resistance has been employed by social
movements throughout Mexican history. Indigenous people have participated in
rebellions throughout Mexican history (Mallon 1995; Knight 1990). This time, however,
indigenous people are central protagonists in this struggle. In this discourse, such
concepts as the individual, democracy, and the nation diverge from the way Westerners
generally understand them. The way that these new political ideas are articulated as
“Mayan” or “indigenous” concepts also has an important role in how they are received,
“decoded” and re-articulated by various urban social movements in Mexico. While
Mexican Indian people continue to face discrimination and exploitation by the state, in
the eyes of Mexico’s poor, Indian people also represent an “authentic” alternative to neo-
liberal political hegemony in Mexico. Much of Mexico’s urban poor have rural and/or
indigenous roots (Nuñez Gonzalez 1990). Also, for the purpose of this essay it is
important to recognize that urban activist “articulation” and appropriation of this
indigenous political thought is very different from the context of the practice and
articulation in Chiapas. The level of conflict and violence in Chiapas in much greater
than in Mexico City². As will be shown below, the EZLN, as a majority indigenous
army/social movement, has created a “heightened race consciousness” in urban activist

²For updates in English about the conflict in Chiapas. See Servicio Internacional por la Paz www.sipaz.org
and Global Exchange www.globalexchange.org and www.mexicosolidary.org. For more in depth reports
and analysis in Spanish go to Enlace Civil’s website www.enlacecivil.org.mx
circles, especially for those urban activists who see themselves as having indigenous roots.

However, many authors are skeptical of this perceived “idealization” of indigenous culture. In discussing the fair trade cooperatives set up by NGOs to support Zapatista indigenous communities, Vargas-Centino warns that there is a danger in this idealization, which can dehumanize indigenous people and actually can lead to new forms of dependency (2001: 73; Leyva Solano 2001: 38). Also, since peace talks have been stalled since 1997, Mexican popular support for the EZLN has been “erratic” (Leyva Solano 2001: 35).

Apart from the difference of political and social context between Mexico City and Chiapas, others are critical of the practices of indigenous “normative systems” within the communities themselves. For example, Roger Bartra believe that political practices in indigenous communities are repressive and only represent leftover practices from centuries of colonial domination. They argue that little good can come from attempting to reproduce these political practices in the urban arena. Bartra believes that the political structures in these communities tend towards uniformity and militarism (Bartra 1998). The quest for autonomy for Mexican Indian people is regarded under this argument as a threat to Mexico’s emerging democracy, since despite the recent election of Vicente Fox, Mexico’s first opposition president, the country still lacks fundamental democratic institutions and culture. Here, indigenous autonomy and this new Indian identity politics can lead easily to “fundamentalism” or a kind of ethnic extremism (Bartra 1998).

Other prominent scholars criticize the individual practices themselves. When I commented to Adolfo Gilly that the EZLN [introduce organization here (see p. 13)]
attempts to use consensus, he quipped “But consensus is a backward step for
democracy!” (interview with Gilly 2000). Some members of NGOs echoed this
sentiment stating that many urbanites enamored with the Zapatistas appropriate Indian
forms of politics out of a “romanticism” (interview with Anaya 2000). Still, even some
of the most sympathetic intellectuals agreed that there are severe limitations in urban
Mexico’s appropriation of indigenous political forms. Miguel Alvarez, Secretary to
Archbishop Samuel Ruiz and adamant supporter of the Zapatistas put it this way:

Urban movements have identity problems. Urban citizens went to Chiapas
because they wanted to build an alternative. But when things took too long and
the negotiations didn’t work out, they returned to the city, to their natural habitat
and worried about their more immediate problems. I think that is a natural process
(2000).

In spite of all of the criticism of naive activists romanticizing the noble savages of
Chiapas, the fact remains that the impact of Zapatismo on many urban popular
movements (especially in the housing groups and students groups), as well as militant
Zapatista organizations has been remarkable. In my interviews with urban FZLN
members and many members of the urban popular movement, finding Zapatismo was
like finding a lost and forgotten part of themselves. The reason that these groups receive
Zapatismo with such open hearts is that students and the urban poor face similar kinds of
exclusion under the neo-liberal regime. For example, the recent university student
movement (1999-2000), one of the most radical movements in decades, attests to these
new urban exclusions (Hernández Navarro 2000). I interviewed a number of student
activists during this time. I also attended several of their events. In interviews, students
felt that the government was abandoning them just as it had abandoned the negotiated
agreements with the Zapatistas. They took cues from the Zapatista movement by rotating
their leadership and they attempted to make decisions through the use of consensus. Many students traveled to Chiapas during the strike. In September of 1999, two indigenous Zapatistas traveled from Amador Hernández, Chiapas to Mexico City to denounce the construction of a road through their community by the military. Student activists accompanied the two Zapatistas to and from Chiapas. They also gave a presentation to an “alternative” Mexican Independence day celebration in the Che Guevara auditorium at the National University (UNAM) in Mexico City. The FZLN also had a significant influence in the student movement, as it was the fastest growing “corrientes” or political current by the time the movement was crushed. This largest university campus of the Américas was occupied by the students for ten months until the wee hours of February 6, 2000, when thousands of military police stormed the campus, effectively ending the strike. The new exclusions faced by the urban poor and the students are also inflected with a history of racism and colonialism. And generally speaking, it is a kind of exclusion not faced by their NGO counterparts. Their contact with Zapatista communities, ideas, and practices has led many urban activists to challenge their leadership and the directions of their respective movements, sometimes pulling movements away from the tight paternalist grip of political parties. They changed their discourse and have opened themselves up to new ideas. For many individuals I interviewed, these changes included a personal transformation as well. This was particularly true of the members of the first urban civilian Zapatista organization, the FZLN or (Zapatista National Liberation Front). One male volunteer with the FZLN described to me how his involvement in Zapatismo had a strong personal element:

The general environment was what was contaminating me. In spite of the fact that I was doing union work, it was just that. It really didn’t matter to me what
was happening in the country. I was more worried about getting paid on the
twentieth. I was preoccupied with going to parties, possibly meeting a girl. I mean
there is nothing wrong with that but that was it. Nothing more. I was doing
absolutely nothing with my life. I had to learn to act the way that I think, feel and
believe. And Zapatismo offered me this opportunity. It allowed me to be
different from everyone else. But always, being different and respecting everyone
else.... And because of this, I integrated myself into the Zapatista movement.
Yes, I believe in the possibility of changing things in a different way. I don’t
know how different things will be but I know they have to be done another way.
They have to be exercised in a different way. Frequently, many Europeans would
say, “I thought Zapatismo offered a new form of organization.” And no, it
doesn’t. There are only so many ways that you can organize. The difference is in
the way this organization is carried out. I think that is the most important thing to
remember. It doesn’t matter how you are organized but it is in how you carry it
out. How it is carried out in daily life. Zapatismo for me is not just a political
line….. For me, Zapatismo is not this. It is a way of life. It’s not just about going
to meetings, conferences and marches (Interview with Carlos 1999).

This FZLN member and many others I spoke with gave similar testimony as to how
Zapatismo as a movement changed their personal and political lives. The young male
unionists and FZLN member whom I quoted also told me what he had learned from
Zapatismo. He stated that he now sees cultural differences in a positive light whereas
before encountering the Zapatista movement, he considered himself to be much more
judgmental of other people’s appearances “how they look and dress or the color of their
skin...” (1999).

These activists along with others interviewed pointed to the similarity between
Maoist political organizations, Indian forms of organization, and Zapatismo. These
activists claimed that the important ingredient that distinguishes Zapatismo from these
forms is its “religiosity.” This “religiosity” is a spiritual dimension of the movement.
Here I would like to elaborate what I mean by “religiosity”. It doesn’t mean a specific
religion. In fact religious conflict in Chiapas continues to be endemic even in the pro-
Zapatista autonomist municipalities (Eber 2001). I am speaking more of a cosmological
difference. This cosmological difference (Mignolo n.d.) is best encapsulated in the idea of “dignity,” a notion inflected by indigenous communities and representing human value above and beyond relations of the market. This represents a spiritual dimension of a very concrete social and political conflict that I will describe in further detail below. It is this religiosity that urban activists, especially those in the FZLN, have drawn upon to attempt to transform themselves and the larger Mexican political culture, for it provides members with a legitimacy that is higher than the Mexican state. From these discussions with members, I began to ask the question is “What are the elements in Zapatista discourse that have such as powerful effect on urban citizens?” Explaining the indigenous elements of political organization and thought in Chiapas will help explain the foundation of this new legitimacy for “doing politics differently.”

The FZLN

From the first days of the uprising to the signing of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture signed by the Mexican government and the EZLN in February of 1996, the majority of the left enthusiastically supported the Zapatistas. In that same year, the EZLN called forth the creation of the Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or FZLN. The FZLN or the “frente” would provide the urban national civil structure for the EZLN insurgents to join once the peace agreements had been implemented. As the government refused to implement the accords, the EZLN soon came to the conclusion that the FZLN would serve as a civil political organization that would practice politics from the Zapatista vision (Marcos 1997). The EZLN found itself as it is to this day in a protracted low intensity war with the government.
Primarily based in Mexico City, the FZLN is organized in local committees constituted by diverse sectors of Mexican society, including intellectuals, union members, members of the urban popular movement, students and young people, and feminists. In the early days of its formation many indigenous communities outside Chiapas wanted to join the FZLN, but the EZLN decided that it was important that indigenous people have “their own separate political space.” So in the same year, the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) was formed. As FZLN leader Sergio Rodriguez commented to me, the EZLN recognizes that a plurality of political spaces was and continues to be preferable to one overarching organization that would encompass all of civil Zapatista politics in a singular way (Interview with Rodriguez 2000). One of the main criticisms of the FZLN is that it did not constitute a broad democratic front for change in Mexico like the broad fronts for democracy seen in other Latin American countries. However, the idea of “difference” and “plurality” are seen as positive attributes in Zapatista discourse. Hence, the lack of a unifying and overarching organization leads many scholars to regard groups like the FZLN as failures. The FZLN can be criticized for many things, and their own members readily admit mistakes made by the organization. But those who read the organization as merely a “failure” do not understand the mission of the organization and the new politics it is attempting to inaugurate.

While the majority of official FZLN members live near or in Mexico City, the FZLN has some strong committees that have an influence on other social and political organizations in other states as far North as Baja California (Tijuana) and in the southern States like Tabasco. This plurality of political spaces for many traditional leftists is
nebulous and ineffective. The FZLN, they argue, is a failure because its inability to construct a formal political organization that can amass hundreds of thousands of Mexicans in the Zócalo (main plaza) in Mexico City. They criticize the FZLN’s low media profile and their refusal to participate in any electoral politics as an organization (Interview with Gilly, Roux, Gellert 2000). However, one needs to look closely at how FZLN members participate in political issues of national importance, like the 1999-2000 university student strike. There are political effects that don’t register in the way that their critics would like. As Neil Harvey states, drawing from the wellsprings of the long struggle for indigenous self-determination, the mandate of the FZLN was not to “win positions of political power” but to democratize institutions so that they obey collective decisions (1999: 135). Many intellectuals and activists were skeptical of both the EZLN and the FZLN decision not to aspire to political power. FZLN politics is more personal, informal, fluid, and contingent. These characteristics are contrasted with the kind of unions and political parties that organized in previous periods in Mexican history. In fact, I would go as far as to say that the way the FZLN has organized corresponds to many organizations involved in the anti-globalization (global justice) movement. They work in small committees, attempt to resolve issues by consensus, and importantly, eschew organizing in traditional politics, especially around the electoral process. Increasingly, this the most frequent criticism of Zapatista politics in Mexico and the global justice movement in the United States. One can read similar criticism of the anti-globalization movement building international and local ties at the expense of having a national vision for change (Epstein 2001; Gindin 2002).
Each FZLN committee has its own dynamic and focus on the kind of political work it does. When FZLN proposals are made, members take the proposals back to the committees for debate and discussion and then the committee’s suggestions, doubts and clarifications are taken to the General Council of Representation (CGR). This idea of taking proposals back to committees for debate and discussion is a method directly taken from the Zapatista indigenous communities where political decisions are made through consensus in community assemblies.

FZLN committees are made up of members of the teacher’s union, the electrical workers union, student groups, neighborhood associations, and urban groups and individuals that never participated in any political organization before. Often times, a committee’s political project relates closely to the work they already do. For example, Committee Oventic is made up of members of the teachers’ union. This committee primarily supports the construction of schools in Chiapas. With the support of San Diegans por la Paz, FZLN-Oventic travels to Oventic, Chiapas, a Zapatista indigenous community, to help in the construction of the community’s first high school. There is also a FZLN committee formed by members of the Mexican electrical workers union (SME). For the last five years, these members have been building an electrification project in La Realidad, Chiapas. Still other committees work on more general projects such as support work for EZLN political initiatives, international solidarity work, neighborhood-housing work or support for the university student strike. In general, a substantial part of the political work of the FZLN goes into supporting EZLN national political initiatives, such as the 1999 referendum on indigenous rights and culture and the 2001 March of the EZLN General Command to the National Congress in Mexico City. There is an
incredible diversity in both the political histories of the membership and the political work of the FZLN committees. In Tijuana, for example, there is a committee that organizes in the maquiladora industry (Interview with Cota 2000). And some members from that committee also made it to Seattle for the December 1999 protest against the World Trade Organization Conference. The diversity of the FZLN combined with the principle of using consensus for decision-making makes the process of constructing the FZLN as a political organization painfully slow.

Zapatistas, Autonomy, and the Current Conflict

One central tenet that underpins Zapatista political discourse is the idea of autonomy. The signing of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture in February 1996 served as a watershed for indigenous rights in Mexico providing a constitutional framework for the recognition of indigenous autonomy (Harvey 1999). While the signing of this accord was hailed by many as the first step towards a true transformation the Mexican state, others feel that it didn’t go far enough in terms of providing a “fourth level of government” for indigenous autonomy (Díaz Polanco 1997). And still others felt that the EZLN missed the boat by focusing exclusively on the rights of indigenous people excluding poor mestizos (Bartra 1997). As the conflict has dragged out for almost nine years, tensions have increased in the Chiapas region, despite President Fox’s campaign promise to end the Chiapas conflict in “fifteen minutes” and despite the

---

4The San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture is of critical importance for understanding both the EZLN’s impact on the movement for indigenous rights but also for understanding the new political spaces in Mexican civil society as a number of sectors participated in this process. For two excellent summaries see Neil Harvey and Luis Hernández Navarro’s essays in the Comparative Peace
EZLN’s General Command historical march to the National Congress in Mexico City in March of 2001. After the journey of the General Command of the EZLN to Mexico City as millions of Mexicans throughout southern Mexico to greeted them, it was hoped that the Mexican Congress would finally implement the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture\(^5\). Instead Congress passed a bill on indigenous rights that actually guts state laws on indigenous autonomy (Sanchez 2001). The recent Supreme Court decision to throw out the challenges to the government’s version of the indigenous law by Mexican indigenous groups clearly demonstrates the lack of will to resolve the issue of indigenous autonomy.

The EZLN’s claim of “autonomy” has set the terms for the constructing of new political identities in Mexico, one that “breaks with the hegemonic discourse of the nation” (Hernández Castillo 2001). A number of EZLN activists stated to me that the concept of “autonomy” is an inspiration for constructing a new politics in Mexico (Interview with Carlos, Marta 2000). As a caveat, these “elements” of indigenous discourse are not pure or free floating and do not define the totality of indigenous experience or politics. Indigenous politics in Mexico is infinitely complex, and it would be impossible to address this complexity in this essay. As mentioned, anthropologists have pointed out the way in which colonialism and Mexican modernity have transformed original indigenous culture (but always already in a state of change like all culture) (Nash 2001). In the eight years since the initial EZLN uprising, conflicts around religion,

---

\(^5\) For a listing of the General Command’s speeches at the Mexican National Congress, see the April 2001 issue of Memoria Cemos. It can “sometimes” be accessed on the web. www.memoria.com.mx/146
politics, and resources have intensified in several indigenous communities in Chiapas.

SIPAZ's (International Service for Peace) recent report puts it bluntly:

The causes of these conflicts - that even occur between previously allied organizations - are many: relations with both governments and the acceptance or not of their programs and subsidies; different forms of building autonomy; disputes over land or for political control in a given territory; ideological and religious differences, etc. The growing antagonism often leads to violent resolution of differences at a high cost in displaced people, injuries, kidnappings and even deaths (SIPAZ 2002).

At the same time, due to the prolonged conflict in Chiapas, social relations among the social organizations previously allied with the EZLN have deteriorated, leading to increased inter and intra community conflict in the last few years (Burguete Cal y Mayor 2002). Despite these ongoing conflicts in indigenous communities, I argue that there are still elements or subterranean currents that have survived the genocidal and assimilationist onslaughts against indigenous people and against the Zapatistas specifically. It is these currents that have inspired many urban activists to do and think politics differently. In other words, while there is always a hybridization of culture, there is also a "cosmological differences" (Mignolo 2000) between the indigenous and Euro modern world-view. The EZLN uprising ruptured the dominant social narrative and has been subsequently taken up by individual and collective actors in Mexico through which they are attempting to construct a differential political identity.

The complexity of the indigenous communities can been seen in economic, religious, and cultural conflicts. It can also been seen in the fact that there is not a singular proposal for indigenous autonomy. The struggle for indigenous autonomy is complex, constituting distinct political proposals. There are three general autonomy proposals. The first is based on the Nicaragua model proposed by Hector Diaz Polanco
called the Regional Autonomy Proposal or (RAP) *Interview* with Hernandez Navarro, 2000) (Díaz Polanco 1995). This is a pluri-ethnic model of autonomy that would include areas of a number of Mexican states with high indigenous populations and entail the creation of a fourth level of government (Mattiace 1998). Indigenous movements in Oaxaca, on the other hand, propose the “communal autonomy.” This is the most “local” proposal, and while it is considered the most authentic to the traditional Indian communities, it is also criticized as the weakest model in terms of gaining control over natural resources. Critics charge the communalists with gutting the ability of indigenous peoples to have control over natural resources if there is no larger level of autonomy to manage these resources. But the EZLN never argued the communalist position. Rather, the EZLN position is that all autonomy proposals need to be constructed from the ground up, beginning with the community as base (Esteva 2001).

The Zapatista movement in Chiapas has actually created 32 autonomous municipalities, which by comparison would be akin to the county in the United States (Nash 2001: 130). While the Mexican government has refused to implement the signed accords on indigenous rights, the Zapatistas have “enacted” these agreements and created “parallel” governments exercising an autonomy in practice. These “autonomous municipalities” exercise a “different” politics recuperating indigenous tradition along with practices of radical democracy (Carlsen 1999: 60). These traditions are based on what is referred to as the “cargo” system or “normative” systems. Cargos are religious/political positions that of community members, usually but not always male. From keepers of religious areas to the organizer of community religious festivals and
finally as the arbiter of community and inter-community conflicts, each cargo represents an increase in both responsibility to the community and in authority.

In counter balance to the hierarchical organization of the normative systems exists the "community assembly." The community assembly is where the decisions of the indigenous communities are made. And their use of "consensus" as a decision-making model has been the inspiration for the construction of a new democratic politics to many urban Zapatistas, as three young FZLN members who are also university students conveyed to me (Interviews with Juan, Ignacio, Hector 1999). However problematic this translation of indigenous political forms has been in the urban arenas of Mexico, there is no doubt that it has inspired the political imagination of thousands of activists.

Mandar Obedeciendo

"Mandar obedeciendo" is probably the most widely used slogan of the Zapatistas. It has filtered not only into urban Zapatista groups, but even in the legislature "mandar obedeciendo" is quoted as a way of criticizing someone for not listening to their constituents (Gall 1998). This concept has become part of the daily language of social movements, unions, civil groups, and even political parties. While few people actually have the will to practice "mandar obedeciendo," its introduction into Mexican daily political life is an important step forward in challenging the old political culture.

In this schema, what makes a person different is what makes one equal. This is another political slogan of the Zapatistas and it is also taken from the idea of the individual in the indigenous communities. Every individual is a synthesis of the entire community (the whole of humanity), including its future and its history (Interview with
Vera 1999). Every individual only has a partial view of the world. In the *Popul Vuh*, the Mayan book of Creation, the gods, jealous of the human beings’ ability to see all, put smoke over their eyes so that they would only have a partial view of the world (Tedlock 1985). So in order to get a true view of reality, everyone’s point of view must be heard. As Ramon Vera described to me, “My value as an individual is that I can see the world in a way that you can’t and your value as an individual is that you can see the world that I can’t. In the indigenous community, ‘only together can we truly know reality’” (interview with Vera 1999). These are the ideas that are the heart and soul of Zapatista consensus and democracy.

The Zapatista idea of “cultural difference” is also affected by their concept of the individual and the community. One of the Zapatista principles, “listening to the Other,” has an important impact on the way they regard difference. From the beginning of the Zapatista movement, the activists had to learn to listen to the indigenous communities that they were trying to organize. By learning to listen, the early Zapatista activists constructed a new methodology for building a movement.

In the Zapatista communities, everyone is valued because everyone has a different voice and a different way of looking at the world. “Listening to the Other” as a concept was taken from the organizing in the Zapatista indigenous communities, and used in their broader political initiatives such as the National Democratic Convention, which was a national forum for building a democratic movement in Mexico sponsored by the Zapatistas in 1994. “Listening to the Other” also connotes a new kind of communication between cultural groups. Groups from different cultures coming together to discuss an issue makes the dialogue rich and fruitful. This space is not a space where one group
should try to dominate the other to convince them of the rightness of their ideas. It is a 
"dialogic" process where sharing between different cultural groups leads to new ideas, 
objectives, and goals (Street 1996). Otherness, in this sense, isn’t to be fetishized, or 
feared, it is only a truth because, in the Zapatista sense, “we are all others.” Cultural 
difference is a fact of life. This, of course, is an ideal type of the concept of individuality 
in the Zapatista communities. To the degree that communities interact with other 
communities, be they indigenous or mestizo communities, and international communities 
through immigration, these concepts rub up against other concepts of the individual. 
Ramon Vera explains this kind of individuality and its relationship to the community:

[citation missing?]

—This concept takes us to the way that the Zapatista regard relations with groups 
outside of their communities, other organizations, institutions, and the state. The 
Zapatistas profess respect and dignity for all groups, even their enemies. In their dealings 
with the Mexican state during the first negotiations and during the San Andrés talks, the 
fact that the indigenous guerrillas would not lower their gaze to the government officials 
sitting across from them at the negotiating table represented the new kinds of social 
relations ushered in by the Zapatistas. One FZLN activist present at the negotiations 
describes how the Zapatistas’ behavior at the negotiating table marked this new shift in 
social/ethnic relations in Mexico:—

When the government sat down for the first round of talks with the Zapatistas, I 
remember something that impacted the talks greatly. One of the women who was 
at the talks was Comandante Trini. She must have been well... pretty old. So, the 
government negotiators talked and talked and talked and talked and used a lot of 
big concepts. They wanted to put the Indians in their place. They wanted to show 
that they were setting the terms of the debate and that they were the ones who 
were running things. Culturally, the Indian is not like the white man. The Indian 
listens a lot. He will listen and listen. The white man will interrupt and intervene
to be heard. But the Indian will sit there for hours until all of the talking is done and then calmly state what he thinks. So, the government negotiators had this attitude. And this subcomandante got up after listening to these guys talk for two days. She stood up and said, “You all speak very nicely. Very complicated. You all believe that we Indians are foolish. But I am just going to tell you that we the Indian Zapatistas have learned to meet your gaze directly and look directly into your eyes. We are not going to lower our gaze. You all are used to the Indio that won’t make eye contact with you. Never again will you find an Indian Zapatista that won’t meet your gaze.” Then she began to talk to them in Tzeltal and she kept talking for two hours. And then at the end of her discourse she said to them in Spanish, “You didn’t understand me, right?, Well we can also talk in a way that you don’t understand OK.” This is just one example of how the Indian has gained back her voice. This is a process that has been so difficult for people that have been repressed, ignored, discounted to the point where they discount themselves.... (Interview with Tatiana 1999).

This act represents the Zapatistas’ notion of “dignity” that underpins the concept of “religiosity” and the “cosmological difference” which, in turn, provides the “accent” (Voloshinov 1986) on their ideas about otherness and cultural difference (Holloway 1997). The Zapatistas’ challenge to the Mexican government, their demand for the right to be equal and different, their demand to look everyone in the eye as equals have inspired Mexicans across the nation, in rural and urban areas. Many activists in the FZLN, the urban popular movement, and the student movement commented to me that if the poorest, least educated, and most oppressed group in Mexico had the courage to defy the Mexican state, then they must have this courage as well. After witnessing the defiance of the Zapatistas, these urban groups began to take up the banner of dignity, demand their rights as individuals from “different” groups and demand to be included in the decision making of their government. The EZLN, drawing from the wellspring of the history of indigenous resistance, has transformed the meaning of democracy and the nation by including concepts such as “collective rights” and cultural rights (Harvey 1999).
One young woman who was from a very poor urban community and grew up as an activist in the Urban Popular Movement, or MUP. She expressed to me why she was attracted to organizing in the FZLN and how her experience differed from when she was working in the MUP:

Well I was born and raised in Iztapalapa. I come from a very poor family. My family migrated to the city years ago. My family was from the state of Morelos and the State of Mexico. So they came to the city and settled in Tepito and colonia Guerrero. When these colonias started out, they were considered lost cities. Then my family moved to Iztapalapa, and I grew up there with many things lacking in life. I lived in a very machista environment which was strongly rooted. When I was finishing primary school, my father became a solicitant for a house through the popular organization Asamblea de Barrios when it was headed by Marco Rascon. Well, we got the little money that we had together and we gave them the money but we never got the house. So well at this time, I started going to marches with my dad of Asamblea de Barrios. After not getting the house, my dad got involved in another organization called UPREZ. And through UPREZ, we finally got the house. Well, my dad because he had to work, so he used to send me to the meetings of UPREZ. At that time, my mom and dad separated and my dad and I got involved in the struggle for housing. So I went to the meetings and the demonstrations. I really didn’t know a lot but one thing that I did learn during this time was that people were really manipulated. I mean people did what the leaders told them to do. You really couldn’t act on your own because only the leaders had the truth. Well, finally my dad got the house. And I was about 11 or 12 at the time and I was spending a lot of time at UPREZ. God, I used to cry because I was so bored at these meetings. Well I was eleven, I wanted to be out playing. It was horrible. After this, things were easier for my dad because he had his house. We were still involved in the organization and you could see that there was so much manipulation going on of the masses. Then my dad didn’t really like the way people were being manipulated into being corralled into demonstrations for the PRD either.

This young woman who hails from one of the poorest areas of Mexico City then describes the qualitative difference in working with the FZLN as opposed to her previous political work in the urban popular movement:

So in 1995 when I started to get involved with the zapatistas, some of the people in UPREZ told me “Chiapas or UPREZ” and I said, “Chiapas.” Well, in the UPREZ people are involved in the organization for their own personal interests. They want something. In turn, in the Zapatistas movement is working for something much broader than themselves for a change that will benefit everyone. I mean the zapatistas don’t have anything to hand out to people. There is no housing or powerful political positions to obtain. This isn’t for your own benefit. It is a benefit for the whole country. It is for all of the people who have been
fucked over like the indigenous people. So I started getting involved and in 1997, I started a FZLN committee. We are in the committee Oli which means movement in Nahuatl. We organized the committee and participated in the foundational congress of the FZLN (Interview 2000).

Izabel also described to me that before she started working with the Zapatistas she used to be ashamed of her very dark features, now she felt proud of the way she looked. While she learned a lot about organizing in the urban popular movement, she said that her experience with the Zapatistas provided her with “dignity” and a “emotional healing” (2000). I was a little taken aback at how frank and open she was with me about her feelings regarding the transformation of her identity and her thoughts about race and racism in Mexico. She said

I feel like the zapatistas have changed my life. Now, I feel proud to be Mexican. I feel like I am reflected in this dignified people who rose up in arms against the government. I feel like I look like an Indian woman. I have dark skin and straight here and I have learned to be proud of that. I learned to appreciate being able to eat and I learned how to defend my country and my rights. I learned also to respect those who are different than me. I really liked working in the community in Chiapas. We all shared whatever we had and there wasn’t one person who had all of the control or the wealth or the power. We all decided together the way that we wanted things to be. I learned how to take the other into account. I learned to value others and that they are important too (Interview with Izabel 2000).

At the end of what I considered to be one of my most intense interviews, right as we were wrapping up, she Izabel stopped me and said, “Oh and one more thing I learned from the Zapatistas…. I don’t hate white people... I don’t hate Americans anymore” (2000).

This kind of psychical transformation is difficult to measure in the way one analyzes opinion polls. It isn’t seen in mass demonstrations or how many press conferences one is able to organize. However, the FZLN provided a forum for individuals such as Izabel to begin to slowly break away from traditional political forms
and charting a new path. This is one small example of how the dominant narrative of political identity was broken when the EZLN challenged the Mexican state and at the same time what it means to be Mexican. For Izabel, her ties to the “dominant social narrative” were broken and are being constructed along new lines of affinity and difference. This is akin to Chicana social theorists Chela Sandoval’s notion of “differential consciousness,” where people living under oppression move between ways of viewing the world both as a survival strategy and as a method for changing their circumstances (2000). Izabel’s political work in the FZLN consists of “democratizing” the urban popular movement and she also helped organize support for the university student strike.

The community, the individual, dignity, and cultural difference are closely linked together in Zapatista political discourse. In urban Mexico, it has been more difficult to carry out decision-making processes the same way as they do in Zapatista communities for a variety of reasons. One significant reason is that the old political culture still dominates political life in Mexico. Most social movements in Mexico today are inspired by the Zapatista movement to one degree or another. However, they are considered by FZLN members to be “very contaminated by personalistic and paternalistic politics.” (Interview with Elorriaga 2000). This is true of the urban popular movement, unions, NGOs and to a certain extent the urban Zapatista organizations themselves. There is a constant juxtaposition of the idea of the “old political culture” and the “new political culture.” This came up in almost every interview.

While the Zapatista organizations, such as the FZLN, attempt to incorporate ideas such as “listening to the other,” the political situation weighs heavily on them. Time is a
very important factor in the ability to build consensus. The majority of FZLN members mentioned that time was a major factor in the inability to "listen to everyone" (interview with FZLN members Enrique, Julia, Inocencio, Marta, 1999–2000). Something happens in Chiapas or the university students go on strike and a decision needs to be made immediately. In these cases, the leadership will make decisions and then consult with the membership. Sometimes people will go along with what the leaders say without questioning them or providing their personal input. As Javier Elorriaga, founding member of the FZLN, stated, the FZLN has a long way to go to be able to truly "practice Zapatista politics... to treat everyone equally and to listen to all... we are getting there but this is a long drawn out process and there is no fixed formula of how to go about it.... how not to rely on leaders... and how to incorporate all the different voices into our decisions" (interview with Elorriaga 2000).

The Idea of the Individual and the Collective in the Construction of Urban Zapatismo

In interviews and in observation, time and again urban Zapatistas discussed with me the "new concept" of the individual that they had developed through their involvement with Zapatismo. Over half of the FZLN members that I interviewed were previously members of left political parties, the urban popular movement, or unions. Another third of the members were concurrently members of unions or social movements while organizing with the FZLN. During my interviews, the theme of the individual resurfaced over and over again. They often described how greatly their previous political organizing differed from their organizing with the Zapatistas. This was especially true of political party and union organizers. In the FZLN, they found a way of "living
politics differently.” This way of living politics had as much to do with their political as their personal lives.

In the FZLN meetings I attended I witnessed many members attempt to listen to the voices of those who disagreed with them. I also witnessed considerable efforts on the part of many members to resolve conflict in a constructive way when arguments ensued. In the 20 FZLN meetings that I attended, there were a few individuals that didn’t seem very interested in carrying out the Zapatista mandate of “listening to the other.” These few individuals happened to be union organizers. Despite long meetings, most of the other members were patient with them. During my research during 1999-2000, the university conflict had divided most of the country, polarizing Mexican society. There was a large gap in social movements, including the FZLN, having to do with both generation and social class. For most of 1999 and the early part of 2000, the FZLN organized with the CGH, or the General Strike Council of the University Strike. There were considerable differences of opinion within the FZLN movement as to how to handle the strike. These differences were most marked between the union organizers and older members or what are called in Mexico “sesentaocheros” or “68’ers” -- those who participated in the university movement of 1968 in Mexico. Younger FZLN members who were directly involved in and affected by the movement often gave emotional speeches in favor of the CGH. In December of 1999, members of the CGH held a demonstration in front of the U.S. embassy in support of students protesting the World Trade Organization in Seattle. A few hundred students and others showed up. By 5:30 p.m., the sun was going down. According to FZLN members and student activists, a few provocateurs began to throw rocks at cars and smashing windows while the students had
been throwing tomatoes at the embassy. The police showed up and a riot ensued.

Protesters and onlookers were surrounded by patrol cars as the police blocked off access. Students attempted to escape swinging batons, kicks, and punches by running into shops and through the narrow streets of the Zona Rosa tourist district. Several students were beaten. Scores of protesters were arrested, including a few foreigners leaving the embassy who had nothing to do with the protest.

The FZLN meeting following the embassy protest was particularly emotional. Debates flared up about whether or not the CGH members started the riot, whether or not the student’s organizing tactics are hurting the movement, and how much the FZLN should be supporting them. One FZLN member who is also a member of the Mexican Electrical Worker’s Union (SME) harshly criticized the behavior of the students and the FZLN’s refusal to take a leadership role with the students. He argued that the FZLN was failing as a political organization because it refused to provide guidance to the students.

In a discussion with me about the student movement, he commented:

Supporting the students is not enough for a political organization like the FZLN. A responsible political organization must be able to provide a critical political position where it is needed. A political analysis of the situation. A responsible political organization must be able to make political proposals. But this didn’t happen. So what does that make us? Followers, is what it makes us. Mass movements are great and all but sometimes they make mistakes. If the Russian revolution didn’t happen when the conditions permitted, it would have failed miserably. And there were some that tried to make it happen earlier. But there were those with vision who saw that the conditions did not exist and did not allow for it. That is why it is so important to have political vision. Sometimes the people with the real political vision are the most unpopular ones. So from this point of view, I think we have followed a very passive line with the students and haven’t played the role that we could have or should have with the students. Basically our line is not to criticize the students and I think this is wrong (Interview with Juan 2000).
After this member provided a very long speech about how the FZLN had failed the students, another older member chimed in that the student movement was behaving in a “very immature” manner. He also took a few minutes to discuss the virtues of the movement of 1968, which, according to this activist, was both idealistic and knew how to organize with different sectors of society. The students today, on the other hand, wanted everything and if they didn’t get it, then they wouldn’t end the strike. He went on to discuss the main failure of the student movement:

Let me say something. I think the main problem of this strike is not just the method. The problem of method comes from the fact that speaking as an old communist party member, the movement has been vanguardist from the beginning. That is the problem. The problem of method comes from there. So the seed was sown in the beginning for this to happen. What the movement needs to be doing is reaching out to the students on a daily basis and getting input from them. Even in the last few years, the communist party has made rules where every member must respect the agreements of the national membership over the agreements of your own local committee. I think the way they are organizing is backward and harmful to the movement (Notes Dec 14, 1999).

The meeting was incredibly tense during this discussion. Izabel, who I had interviewed earlier, and who had been at the embassy protest was fighting back tears. She silently awaited her turn to speak as several of the older members lambasted the student movement. Finally she spoke:

Where is the solidarity in this room? ‘Nos rompieron la madre’ yesterday—(They beat the shit out of us)! Where was everyone yesterday? I hear a lot of criticism from you but where were you!?! You didn’t see what happened to us! They surrounded us and proceeded to beat the shit out of us! There were guys with white hats from the Secretary of Governance that started it! So many people are bad mouthing the student movement.... If you are going to criticize us, then you need to be there instead of just talking about how your movement was better. People need to be there for the students! (Notes Dec 14, 1999).

While emotional, this meeting represented the cultural differences present in the FZLN and their ability to deal with these differences in a constructive way. The discussion
continued for an hour or so and then everyone agreed that FZLN members needed to have a more active presence in CGH events. Representatives of various FZLN committees promised to bring more of their members out to events. While there were stark differences of opinion about what the FZLN should do about the student movement, they were able to agree on basic things like being present at events, showing support, raising money, and attempting to make the movement more democratic.

In debates like this, I witnessed a very strong tendency towards patiently listening to everyone. Some of the individuals, like the union member above whose attendance at meetings was infrequent, took opportunities to make very long speeches, taking a lot of time in a two and a half hour meeting. Yet, the only time that people were interrupted was when they were talking about a point that was not on the agenda. In this case, the young woman and the two older members who have weight in the movement were listened to with equal time and attention.

When asked about the respect that the FZLN affords all of its members, one member remarked:

The Zapatista way is to listen and listen to everyone.... not just for the sake of listening cause it’s a nice thing to do but because everyone has something important to say.... I am a housewife.... I’ve never been a member of a political party or a union.... My husband was in the popular movement and I always supported him in his organizing.... But when the Zapatista movement started, we got involved and now I have something to say.... I can talk and I can listen.... I think I even listen to what my kids say more than I used to. I have a voice just like everyone else and everyone needs to be heard (Interview with Irma 2000).

It was remarkable to witness how Zapatista politics not only transformed their political but their personal lives as well. This personal transformation is a part of the “religiosity” that Ramon Vera described as inherent in Zapatismo. There is something sacred about
respect for the individual in Zapatismo. This is an attitude that the FZLN struggled to cultivate towards every individual. Several members mentioned that there have been problems with some more politically experienced members attempting to dominate discussion. Many described this as “left-over contamination of the ‘old political culture’ that the Zapatistas are trying to transform” (Interview with FZLN members Enrique, Marta, Inocencio 2000). They said that people are still having difficulty understanding how Zapatistas organize.

The FZLN’s treatment of the individual is the foundation for their conception of the collective. It is also the foundation for their understanding of autonomy and the nation. Through observation of their meetings, it is very clear that they have worked diligently to respect the dignity of the individual. It didn’t always work, and domination of the group by individuals and the EZLN still occurred. In fact, some members complained to me that the EZLN had too much control over the FZLN’s political work (Interview with Marta and Inocencio 2000). The EZLN does give political lines to the FZLN. This was very apparent in the case of the student strike. A few FZLN members believed that they should have more autonomy from the EZLN and quit the organization over the EZLN’s control of the FZLN’s politics. Others, especially more prominent members like Javier Elorriaga, scoff at this attitude, “Why be a Zapatista then? Start your own organization” (2000). Here is an ever-present contradiction that has been brought up several times by critics of the Zapatistas. Indeed, the reverence of autonomy and the individual stands in contrast with the FZLN’s relationship to the EZLN. Sociologist Rhina Roux, and former member of the FZLN, describes the contradiction this way:
Their problem is that they were born out of the EZLN, which is an army. So we are talking about an organization that wants to be political not in the form of a political party… that wants to practice politics in a new way, but it is inextricably linked to an army. The frente was born not because civil society decided to organize itself but because it was called forth by the EZLN, an army that continues to be in an open war. So this really limits the plan of action of an organization that wants to be civil and that wants to be political, that says it won’t be any part of a political party, and they not only won’t participate in political parties but in any action that attempts to take power. But they act in congruence with what the EZLN wants. And since the EZLN is an organization with its own rhythms and ways of doing things, this ties the hands of the FZLN because it isn’t an independent organization. The FZLN attempts not to submit itself to the EZLN, and it tries to differentiate itself from the EZLN. But at the same time, it can not completely make itself completely autonomous from the EZLN (Interview 1999).

For others, the fact that the EZLN was born out of older peasant and social organizations such as Unión de Uniónes helps to counter balance the hierarchical structure of the military command. So that even within the EZLN itself there is more flexibility in its treatment of dissenting views both inside the army and with its relations with their supporters (Leyva Solano 2001). Clearly, the ideals espoused by the FZLN contradict their relationship with the EZLN. And most members were quick to recognize this contradiction. The EZLN does continue to have a very strong influence over the political direction of the FZLN. However, the desire and the intent to preserve the dignity of the individual were always present in meetings and in the attitudes of interviewees. In contrast, the collective identity of the FZLN seemed to be more precarious than the identity of individual members.

Throughout the course of my research, I witnessed how the FZLN is made up of autonomous local or state committees, some of which are hostile to FZLN leadership for being too heady or discourse-oriented. Some interviewees described the possible fragmentation of the movement and worried about how to build a stronger collective
identity. Often, interviewees described their visits to Zapatista indigenous communities as an inspiration for constructing collective identity in urban areas. However, when it came to implementing practices like consensus, numerous problems arose for them. The political articulations between rural and urban sectors since the Zapatista uprising have been uneven. One FZLN describes the problems with this process:

Part of it is that in the urban area most people, most of the time, can't just take a week or two off to go visit the communities. The other part of it is that the way we have been invited to the communities has been a little bit authoritarian. They have told us, "You don't know, you need to come here and learn." In a certain way, they are saying that we need to be re-educated. This is difficult. This process of understanding the experience of the Zapatistas of Chiapas is going to take a long time. So what has happened is that the way that we have carried something back from the communities and attempted to implement a new politics based on the indigenous experience basically has been more or less an intuitive process. Well of course there are people who have been able to spend a lot of time in the indigenous communities and therefore they have a better understanding of what is going on. They make proposals based on the politics of the indigenous communities. They are able to make the political ideas of the indigenous communities much more concrete. I think that one thing that needs to be taken from the communities is a much deeper feeling of community than urban individualism has (Interview with Hector 1999).

While the FZLN seems successful at creating spaces for individuals to become political actors, the idea of a strong collective eludes them. One activist who was a coordinating committee member and a founding member of the FZLN described to me the problems of attempting to build this collective identity in urban Mexico:

What have we attempted to learn from the indigenous communities? Well, the first is their great capacity for organization. We would love to have their level of organization and we haven't been able to achieve it. We have failed in some ways. They have a great capacity for organization and a great discipline for carrying out agreements. For example, here let's say that we decided to participate in a march. Some people would meet at the starting point, others at the Angel of Independence and others would watch from their living rooms. In Chiapas, the people carry out the agreement to the letter and everyone participates.... In contrast, we don't have that capacity of organization unfortunately (Interview with Avila 1999).
For Avila, like many other FZLN members, a solid collective identity for the FZLN is something that seems always out of reach. Other members believe that the autonomy of each member and the individual committees is something to be celebrated and the attempt to achieve a solid collective identity like the Zapatistas have in Chiapas is an impossible dream.

While attempting to construct this “new kind of political organization” on a national level, the situation of war in Chiapas takes up most of the FZLN’s political energy. Several members commented to me that the militarization and violence in Chiapas make it at best difficult to build their organization, because they are always responding to emergencies. Hence, Adolfo Gilly’s comment that the FZLN is “a mere solidarity organization” (Interview 2000).

It should be remembered that while the Zapatistas are known to by many as for creating a new form of democratic politics, they are living under a situation of war. Miguel Alvarez answers the critics of the Zapatistas who state that they aren’t democratic because they never took back their declaration of war on the Mexican government:

For Indian people, dignity is the central factor in their struggle. It is what motivates their behavior. That is why the Zapatistas never took back their declaration of war. They couldn’t without having certain conditions met. Every six months the EZLN goes to the communities and has a consulta to find out who should be in leadership. There is a military leadership and a political leadership. And the people decide which leadership gets the “bastón” (walking stick), which is the sign of leadership. And every six months for the last three years, the communities, in a special ceremony, have handed the military leadership the “bastón.” They are living in a state of war and so they aren’t going to change that until the conditions change (Interview with Alvarez 2000).

Consensus as a primary decision-making method has been criticized by many as undemocratic or prone to manipulation by charismatic leaders like subcomandante
Marcos. In fact, some of Marcos’s critics, such as Tello Díaz, believe that, in part, his charisma as a leader manipulated the indigenous communities (1995: 2000). In contrast to these formulations, FZLN members believe that consensus is a tool that can help deepen other forms of democratic processes. They don’t use consensus in exclusion of voting. In fact, in Mexico City, political life moves so quickly that often leaders will vote on decisions on their own because there is no time to bring it to all of the committees. Still, an effort is always made to discuss the decisions afterwards and if the membership believes that the leadership acted wrongly, then there is an opportunity to relieve these people of their positions. This is the concept of revocability, taken from the normative or cargo systems used in Zapatista communities. One FZLN member discusses how they use consensus:

Consensus is a challenge for the new form of doing politics. Now, consensus that is used in a bad way can become a form of manipulation or domination. It can be a way of forcing uniformity. It can also be used to repress minorities. Well yes, all of this can be the result of consensus but it can also be the result of voting. I think the important question is how we carry out consensus. How do we use it? One method that has been carried out by the Zapatistas and by their sympathizers is the practice of consulta, referendum, and plebiscite. I think all of these are political tools that help to build and change the way that we make decisions. A consulta has to do with voting but it is voting that takes place alongside debate between different people. I think that the Zapatistas have really developed this tool as a way of deepening the meaning of the vote. We still have a lot to learn in order to be able to use all of these tools. And it has also taught us that voting isn’t the only way to make decisions. But this is a process. We can use consensus properly and we can use voting properly. Or we could abuse both of them. The premise of the Zapatistas is dialogue and to dialogue as broadly as one possibly can. I mean it can be a vote, a referendum or a consulta or an election (Interview with Hector 1999).

The use of consensus and the indigenous view of the individual also have important ramifications for how inter-community, inter-group, and global relations should be conducted. The Zapatista saying is “We want to build a world where many
worlds fit.” This “world” that the Zapatistas speak of is the world of the indigenous community, the municipality, the state, the nation, and the world itself. The idea that every individual is distinct and has something important to contribute because he or she is different, not because of wealth or status, says something important to inter-ethnic and international relations. Luis Gonzalez Souza, professor of international relations at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), describes the contribution of Indian thought to constructing a new vision for the Mexican nation:

Democracy and dignity are very much at the center of Zapatismo ... I feel that it is a demand that you can’t really see. And it doesn’t necessarily have to do with having a better standard of living. It is a way of seeing the world. It is a way of seeing human relations. It is a form of seeing ethical values. This is a very attractive ingredient of Zapatismo. This is what you see also in liberation theology. There is also in Zapatismo a total re-vindication of all kinds of human rights .... the right to life, the right to diversity, the right to autonomy, the right to your own identity while respecting diversity. This is at the center of the Zapatista proposal.... This is the first step of the vision for a new nation that many of us want to build. But from there, we have different emphases that include very important contributions from the indigenous communities (interview with Gonzalez Souza 1999).

The Zapatista movement was nurtured in the indigenous communities of Chiapas. It was in this far away, impoverished and forgotten place that urban mestizos learned “another way of living politics” through listening to the other, respecting difference, learning to dialogue, learning to relate to each other and even the earth in a different way. This new politics rippled out into the urban areas of Mexico and gave social actors a new legitimacy for challenging their corrupt, paternalistic political culture. Of course, as stated in the earlier chapter [2], the results have been mixed and not very clear to date. But something new is beginning to emerge out of the seeds planted by Zapatismo. As of July 2, 2000, for the first time in 71 years, the Mexican people voted in [a party] a different party than the official one. And the vote was respected. There were many external and
internal factors that went into this historical change in Mexican politics. I argue that the new political consciousness that partially led to this change is due in part to the conscious efforts of Zapatistas in both rural and urban areas to create new political spaces and new political actors amidst a dying old, decrepit party regime. Unfortunately, due to [?] the lack of organization and political direction of both the institutional and non-institutional left, these new political spaces in part created by the Zapatistas, led to a sweeping victory of the right.

In Seattle 1999, Washington D.C. April 2000, and the 2000 Democratic Convention in Los Angeles, we can also see new ways of practicing politics. New ideologies, new values, and new practices are being born in the wake of globalization. The Zapatistas are not the vanguard of these new movements, but are a very well developed and highly articulated representation of them.

Zapatistas practices of consensus, notions of the individual and the nation have filtered into a number of urban sectors to varying degrees. These ideas have in some cases invigorated activism and in other cases divided movements. At the very least, new political identities in urban Zapatista movements as they have “decoded” (Hall 1980) indigenous political discourse and put their own unique “accents” (Voloshinov 1986) on concepts such as “listening to the other” and “mandar obeciendo.” This rebellion marks a new era in the development of social movements and revolution in the post cold war era period. While political effects in Mexico have been both uneven and profound, it signals new directions that social change might take in this new century. For movements around the world, the relationship between ethnicity, social change and revolution needs to be reconsidered. For the 1990s was an era where ethnicity was regarded as a negative
force, dividing nations or even worse developing into “fundamentalism” or “separatism.”

The roots of this ideological take on ethnicity in the era of globalization have yet to be adequately theorized and accounted for in a political sense. However, the case of the EZLN’s struggle for a democratic and socially just Mexico offers us another vision of the relationship between ethnic identity and globalization. For [?], [?] may become a new example to be followed.
REFERENCES


Esteva, Gustavo. 2001. "Meaning and Scope of Struggle for Autonomy." Latin American Perspectives. (28) 2; Pp. 130-147; March

EZLN. 1996. Fourth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona. CCRI-EZLN.


Marcos, subcomandante. 1997. “No transformara el EZLN en fuerza política y pacifica,”

La Jornada September 14. Mexico DF.


Interviews with Intellectuals
Anaya, Federico. Interview with Author. February 10, 2000. Mexico City
Alvarez, Miguel. Interview with Author. February 11, 2000. Mexico City
Avila, Enrique. Interview with Author. November 10, 1999. Mexico City
Bañuelos, Juan. Interview with Author. January 18, 2000. Mexico City
Carlsen, Laura. Interview with Author. February 8, 2000. Mexico City
Coll, Tatiana. Interview with Author. September 28, 1999. Mexico City
Cota, Jaime. Interview with Author. January 21, 2000. Mexico City
Elorriaga, Javier. Interview with Author. January 8, 2000. Mexico City
Gellert, Jaime. Interview with Author. December 5, 2000. Mexico City
Gonzalez Souza, Luis. Interview with Author. December 19, 1999. Mexico City
Roux, Rhina. Interview with Author. October 8, 1999. Mexico City
Vera, Ramon. Interview with Author. November 21, 1999. Mexico City

**FZLN Activists with Pseudonyms**

Carlos. Interview with Author. September 10, 1999. Mexico City
Ezekiel. Interview with Author. September 13, 1999. Mexico City
Enrique. Interview with Author. September 23, 1999. Mexico City
Inocencio. Interview with Author. September 29, 1999. Mexico City
Marta. Interview with Author. October 27, 1999. Mexico City
Julia. Interview with Author. October 29, 1999. Mexico City
Hector. Interview with Author. November 30, 1999. Mexico City