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The state of a nation's economy can have major impacts at the regional and local levels, and even that macrosystem is subject to the larger forces of international finance and trade. The emergence of a generally nonviolent rebellion in southern Mexico in recent years shows how intimately interwoven are law, politics, ethnicity, access to wealth, and even an historical figure from far away (Zapata). It is noteworthy that the self-designated "peasants" (campesinos) chose the beginning date of the North American Free Trade Agreement for their initial demonstration, and have cannily used the Internet to communicate their concerns around the world in ensuing years. Collier's clear and concise analysis of complex competing forces at different levels lays bare both strengths and weaknesses in that country's ways of dealing with ethnic minorities, and with fascinating emergences at the "grassroots" level.

Restructuring Ethnicity in Chiapas and the World

George A. Collier

Two events underscore subtle but important shifts in the ethnicity of indigenous populations in Chiapas. On March 19, 1995, several thousand people from dozens of diverse indigenous communities, among them Protestants and Catholics who have often been in conflict with one another, joined in the demonstration in support of liberation theologian Bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Samuel Ruiz. Barely a month later, on the April 19th eve of the scheduled renewal of peace talks between the Mexican government and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, Zapatista Army of National Liberation), an equally diverse gathering of representatives of distinct indigenous communities and sometimes competing indigenous organizations from throughout the region converged on San Andrés Larraínzar to demonstrate support for the Zapatistas.

Ethnic identity once *divided* indigenous communities from one another in the Chiapas central highlands. Both recent events underscore a transformation: in the wake of the Zapatista rebellion, peoples of diverse indigenous background now are emphasizing what they *share* with one another in revindication of economic, social, and political exploitation.

How has this shift in indigenous identity come about? This article argues that the transformation reflects changes in Mexican rural society stemming from fundamental redirections of Mexico's policies for national society and its place in the world order, marking the ending of an era of Mexican social policy and statescraft.

For decades, Mexico effectively managed peasants and Indians as distinct sectors within its "institutionalized revolution," along with workers, ranchers, merchants, and industrialists, all under policies fostering development of a sheltered national economy. Mexico's all-embracing *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party) used a corporatist approach of giving each sector a role in sheltered national development as well as corresponding rewards. As the government developed rural programs, it focused on communities, using agrarian reform to shape them sepa-

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rately, and Indianist policies that tended to “naturalize” ethnic differences among indigenous communities while distinguishing them from those of nonindigenous peasants.

But in the past twenty years, Mexico’s national leaders have reoriented Mexican development to global commodity markets and international high finance. More generally, national planners have embraced the philosophy of structural adjustment that governments throughout the world are using to shuck off social responsibilities to the poor. In Mexico, leaders have set aside the nation’s social contracts with the peasantry and indigenous people, abandoning long-standing programs of agrarian reform—uniting peasants and Indians in opposition to the national state.

As the reorientation ripples through the Mexican countryside, the gap has grown between the better-off and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, and the old structures of community that once framed ethnicity have eroded, making way for a new and evocative indigenous discourse voiced by the Zapatistas on behalf of Mexico’s poor. The Zapatistas, furthermore, speak out from the position of indigenous peoples’ historic subordination to protest problems that beset poor Mexicans everywhere, blurring the lines between indigenous, peasant, rural, and urban poor. To borrow a metaphor, we might say that the rebellion is recrafting ethnicity as an ecumenical rather than parochial discourse, evoked from and spanning society’s base rather than being articulated from on high.¹

OIL DEVELOPMENT AND THE CRISIS IN MEXICAN AGRICULTURE

The Zapatistas chose January 1, 1994—the inauguration of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Association)—to rebel as a way of protesting the government’s “selling out” of Mexico to foreign interests. But NAFTA was only the last link of a chain leading back to Mexico’s decision, after the OPEC crisis of 1973, to sell oil into global markets, unexpectedly transforming and destabilizing Mexican agriculture and ultimately removing its insulation and protection from the global economy.

For decades after President Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized foreign firms’ oil holdings in 1938, Mexico reserved petroleum as a resource to tap for the internal needs of the national economy through a state-run petrochemical industry. To help the depression-era economy recover, Cárdenas subsidized Mexican industry and commerce, keeping the price of oil low and erecting tariffs and restricting imports to protect nascent businesses from foreign competition. Cárdenas stepped up agrarian reform so that peasant and indigenous farming could produce inexpensive foods, enabling workers to get by on low wages favorable to developing Mexican businesses. Those relationships among oil production, peasant and indigenous agriculture, commerce, and industry in the sheltered economy of “import substitution industrialization” sustained Mexico through several decades of growth.

After the OPEC crisis raised world petroleum prices in 1973, Mexico’s decision to export oil distorted these relationships. To produce oil for export and not just for internal consumption, Mexico borrowed massively from the world banking system, glutted at the time with petrodollars from the mid-East and eager to place loans. Mexico used credits to finance new oil exploration—especially in the state of Tabasco and along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico—and to build new infrastructure throughout the country. In Chiapas, the government discovered oil reserves under what has become the heartland of the Zapatista rebellion. It also constructed hundreds of miles of roads and completed three major hydroelectric dams along the Grijalva River that now supply the country with about half of its hydroelectric power.

The resulting boom drew labor into construction, commerce, and transport and began to undercut and transform agriculture. Agriculture declined from about 14% of GDP in 1965 to about 7% of GDP by 1980. In addition, farmers sought to cut labor costs

by shifting to chemical inputs—fertilizers and herbicides—that reduced labor while intensifying production but that also made producers dependent on credits and subsidies. Responding to the crisis in agriculture in the late 1970s, the government extended credits, subsidies, and marketing assistance in an attempt to revive agriculture through President López Portillo's *Sistema Alimentario Mexicano* (SAM, Mexican Foodstuffs System). Planners worried that the country had become too dependent on corn imported from the United States, a threat to Mexico's sovereignty at a time when U.S. politicians spoke of using grains as tools or weapons of foreign policy.

But the 1982 debt crisis shattered Mexico's development boom and the ability of the government to subsidize the transformed agriculture. Collapse of world petroleum prices left Mexico unable to service U.S. \$96 billion of external debt, mostly borrowed on the unfulfilled promise of oil exports. The international banking system forced austerity on the Mexican budget. Credits, subsidies, and market supports began to dry up during the Miguel de la Madrid presidency. Six years later, President Salinas de Gortari embraced policies of liberal restructuring under which Mexico began to sell off or dissolve state-controlled enterprise in various sectors. Salinas targeted peasant agriculture as inefficient, removing remaining supports for peasant production, and redrafting the agrarian code to bring agrarian reform to a halt while allowing privatization and sale of indigenous and peasant lands that the code once protected.

RESTRUCTURING OF PEASANT AND INDIGENOUS LANDSCAPES

Throughout Mexico, these changes plunged peasant and indigenous agriculture into crisis. Poorer peasants who lacked capital or access to credits needed to purchase fertilizer and herbicides abandoned their land or rented it to wealthier compatriots. In many areas of central Mexico, peasants and indigenous people gave up farming and migrated to seek work in the urban peripheries or in the United States.

In Chiapas, reliance on chemical inputs began to differentiate the poor from the better-off *within* indigenous communities, often pitting wealthier indigenous elites of the *cabeceras* (municipal centers) against the poor of the outlying *parajes* or *aldeas* (hamlets) and breaking down community ethnic solidarities. Many of the poor were driven out of their ethnic homelands or left to seek their fortunes in the frontier colonies of eastern Chiapas and in squatter settlements around the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Others took up employment as unskilled workers in construction in oil and hydroelectric development. After the 1982 debt crisis, when austerity curtailed construction, unskilled workers who returned to Chiapas's agrarian economy no longer could find employment, swelling the ranks of the impoverished.

As a result, ethnic populations that once had been community-based began to spread across the geographic and social landscapes of southeastern Mexico, intermingling with different indigenous and non-indigenous rural and urban poor, sometimes even in new livelihoods and new kinds of communities. Many of those marginalized from Chiapas's highland indigenous communities joined Indians and peasants from other states flowing into the tropical forest frontier lands of eastern Chiapas from which the Zapatista rebellion has since emerged. While some retained identities of ethnic origin, others turned to religion to consolidate frontier settlements, establishing them as communities of diverse worship—Presbyterian, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Mormon, or as Catholic-linked Christian-based communities.

Even as oil development redeployed people and identities in this supposedly remote area, it left them vulnerable to dependency on credits, subsidies, and the marketing mechanisms of INMECAFE, the Mexican Coffee Institute. Eastern Chiapas's colonists (or homesteaders) allocated one-third of their production to coffee as a cash

crop, another third to livestock, and the remainder to subsistence crops such as corn and beans. When austerity and restructuring set in, colonists might have been able to weather the shift in economic tides had not the world price of coffee also plummeted in 1989, further devastating peasant producers who had invested in coffee as their principal cash crop. The collapse of coffee prices coincided with Salinas's abrogation of agrarian reform, dashing colonists' unfulfilled quests for land.

Zapatista condemnation of NAFTA thus implicitly protests the trade liberalization and structural adjustment that began a decade earlier with Mexico's decision to enter global petroleum markets. Oil-led development threw agriculture into crisis; it undermined the solidarity of indigenous and peasant communities by differentiating people within them; it impoverished those made vulnerable to the collapse of credits and markets needed to survive in a transforming rural economy. Little wonder, then, that Chiapas's rural poor, no longer protected by the solidarities of old ethnic communities, should embrace the protest voiced by the Zapatista rebellion.

FROM GOVERNING BY PACT TO EXCLUSION

The restructuring of ethnic identities in Chiapas responds as well to a fundamental shift of the Mexican government away from social policies that drew pacts among and support from the various different sectors of Mexican society. Increasingly, the government and its ruling party, the PRI, have opted for policies that favor only the "modernizing" sector linked to international high finance, with waning commitment to other sectors. Many Mexicans, including most of those in peasant and indigenous communities, now feel excluded from the government's social contract. Some have joined parties and organizations opposed to the ruling party.

For decades, beginning with the 1934–40 presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, the ruling party successfully managed public policy to give different sectors of society a sense that each had a voice in a political system that would mediate their sometimes-conflicting interests. In the countryside, the ruling party gave political access to peasants and Indians as well as to ranchers and commercial farmers; urban labor and industry also could count on being heeded. The government claimed to sustain a social contract acknowledging the legitimacy and needs of each sector. Mexico's relative social peace, and the willingness of the people to allow the endorsement of ruling party candidates in decade after decade of managed elections, reflected the success of government by pact.

Pacting reached into agrarian landscapes and evoked a style of indigenous and peasant leadership in which, for the most part, local leaders worked through the framework of municipal institutions and through those of the ruling party, the PRI, to help extract state resources for their followers in return for delivering the vote for ruling party candidates. The success of agrarian reform and Indianist policies in conforming ethnicity to municipal institutions matched the relatively strong loyalties of peasant and indigenous leaders to the government's ruling party.

Austerity, forced on Mexico by the world banking community after the 1982 crisis of debt, undercut the government's ability to sustain its social contract and sectoral pacts. Then, as modernizers within the PRI embraced the ideology of structural adjustment, the government cut subsidies for peasant agriculture and social programs for the burgeoning urban populace living in poverty.

As a result, the hegemonic success of the PRI eroded. In the 1988 presidential elections, the PRI faced its first serious electoral opposition from the *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN, National Action Party) and from supporters of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, many of them PRI defectors who opposed the policies of structural adjustment promised by Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Under Salinas, government policy ceased to repre-

sent all sectors of society. Programs such as Solidarity, ostensibly intended to assist the poor, channeled funding behind the scenes to PRI supporters, to the exclusion of those in the growing opposition.

Peasant and indigenous leadership shifted in style, meanwhile, as rural production concentrated in the hands of PRI-affiliated powerholders who controlled the capital and scarce credits needed to farm with chemical inputs. Elites who had established themselves in power by winning rewards for their followers in return for delivering the vote for the PRI began to monopolize government resources for themselves, using them to capitalize their own production in the transformed agrarian economy. As they no longer needed the labor of poorer compatriots in agrarian production, power-holding elites could cast off economic and political responsibilities to the growing numbers of expendable laborers in their own communities. The organic leaders of yesteryear thus transformed themselves into the *caciques* (roughly, bosses) of contemporary times.

As support for the ruling party eroded, and as marginalized peasants and Indians began to affiliate with the opposition parties, the PRI resorted increasingly to coercive tactics to hold onto the peasant vote, withholding funds and services from those whose loyalties were suspect. Even in indigenous hamlets, authorities withheld the benefits of government programs from those who did not support the PRI. Such practices further fractured rural communities, sharpening the divisions between powerful elites and marginalized poor. Increasingly, as a result, organic leadership among rank-and-file peasants and indigenous populations has coalesced around *opposition* to the PRI, in coalition with political parties of the opposition, with independent organizations, and now with the Zapatistas. Finally, in 2000, PRI lost the presidency.

UNITING AGAINST ARBITRARY AGRARIAN POLICIES

Extremely diverse ethnic and religious affiliation marked the colonization that flowed into eastern Chiapas in response to the restructuring of the agrarian economy in the 1970s. What brought people together in a movement that now spans ethnic and religious diversity was resistance to the arbitrariness of government agrarian policy in the region.

During the 1970s, President Luis Echeverría opened up eastern Chiapas to long-distance colonization by modifying the agrarian code to permit peasants to relocate far from their homes, even across state lines. Yet as colonists settled frontier areas, the government decreed huge tracts of the colonized land off-limits to them as "biore-serves." The huge Montes Azul Bioserve, which encompassed dozens of new frontier settlements, was "reserved," it turned out, for government timbering.

Agrarian authorities ordered colonists in the biore-serves to relocate, but most refused. Attempts by the PRI to coopt peasants in eastern Chiapas and to divide followers from dissidents only heightened antagonisms. As colonists resisted continued pressure to relocate during the 1980s, most of them aligned with opposition to the PRI. When the government claimed overwhelming electoral support in 1988 from eastern Chiapas for the PRI's presidential candidate, Salinas de Gortari, colonists knew the elections had been rigged.

Upon taking office, Salinas rewarded colonists allied with the PRI in the Montes Azul Bioserve by legitimating their land claims—while denying the claims of dissidents and opponents. Shortly thereafter, Salinas announced legislation to "reform" Article 27 of the Constitution, bringing agrarian reform to a halt. In effect, Salinas broke the nation's historic covenant with the peasantry to honor the hope, if not always the reality, of legal agrarian reform. For the first time the Zapatistas, present in small numbers since 1983 and advocating armed resistance to the national state,

won recruits among colonists who believed that they had lost legal recourse to their lands claims.

These arbitrary and contradictory government agrarian policies unified dissident colonists across lines of ethnic and religious difference, while forging links to agrarian activists of other regions in Mexico's south. The Zapatista movement has helped generalize the alliances to span indigenous and non-indigenous peasants throughout and beyond the area of frontier colonization in eastern Chiapas.

NEW ECUMENISM IN INDIGENOUS DISCOURSE IN CHIAPAS

There is a new ecumenism in the ethnicity that is emerging in Chiapas as a result of the Zapatista rebellion—ecumenism with respect to religious difference as well as other kinds of difference.

The joining together of Protestants with Catholics among the indigenous groups who have been demonstrating solidarity with Bishop Ruiz's role as intermediary between the government and the Zapatistas in recent negotiations is an important development because religious difference had been a significant axis of conflict among indigenous groups in Chiapas in recent decades. I believe that the Zapatista rebellion furthered the evolution of such ecumenism.

Many analysts believe that the 1974 Indigenous Congress, organized by Bishop Ruiz at the request of the government of Chiapas to commemorate Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, laid the foundation for the indigenous movement that has coalesced in the Zapatista rebellion. The Congress pulled together indigenous representatives from various linguistic and "tribal" groups, as well as various regions of Chiapas, including the colonizing region of eastern Chiapas, allowing them for the first time to articulate common demands for social change. In the wake of the Congress, independent organizing of indigenous and peasant communities in eastern Chiapas built upon the networks and channels of communication established in the Congress.

One must remember that the 1974 Indigenous Congress built on the catechist networks established by Bishop Ruiz in part to counter the spread of Protestant and evangelical churches in eastern Chiapas, where new religions afforded solidarities needed to consolidate frontier communities. Even though Liberation Theology galvanized indigenous alliances in the 1974 Congress, non-Catholic religious affiliation continued to grow, encompassing up to 40% of the frontier population by the 1990s. In this context, independent organizers had the advantage over religious organizers of being able to embrace groups of different religious persuasion into their movements. The Zapatistas built an inclusive movement in part by disavowing religious affiliation while affirming religious tolerance, epitomizing an ecumenism that has since become more prominent even in Bishop Ruiz's own church efforts.

More generally, the Zapatista movement has adopted what one might characterize as an ecumenical stance with respect to differences of political persuasion by welcoming diverse groups of civil society into a broad-based movement seeking reforms of Mexican society as a whole. As a result, diverse indigenous and peasant organizations have coalesced in organizations such as the *Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinas* (CEOIC, State Council of Indigenous and Campesino Organizations) that echo and reinforce the Zapatistas' challenges to the national state.

THE TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT OF NEW REGIONAL MOVEMENTS

The shift of ethnicity in Chiapas to transcend, yet embrace difference parallels the emergence of new regional movements in many parts of the world where "borderlands"

bring distinct cultures together in interaction without necessarily erasing their differences. Global development moves production "offshore" and circulates people, goods, money, and information in new kinds of translocational spaces shaped by economic restructuring. Peoples drawn together in new ways confront ambiguities of identity and polyvalent senses and possibilities of being. They experiment with guises and roles, and sometimes they forge, reformulate, and mobilize ethnic identity to hail new sympathizers—as the Zapatistas' faceless indigenous visages have appealed to those who project their own identities onto those imagined behind the Zapatista masks.

Contemporary Chiapas illustrates how alliances can span heterogenous peoples in borderlands without necessarily dissolving their differences. Oil-led development transformed southeastern Mexico, drawing the ethnically distinctive Indians out from Chiapas's agrarian economy and thrusting them together with non-indigenous peasants, workers, independent organizers, and even evangelizers, into work, politics, and religions not previously open to Indians. New alignments of wealth and power surfaced and sharpened the basis for a regional indigenous identity that emerged as the reversals of Mexico's energy development thrust the region into crisis. The Zapatistas tapped the discontent and consolidated a movement that elevated indigenous identity out of its old parochial loyalties, linked to patronage and protection of the corporate state, into something new, the shared identity of those whom politicians had spurned in pursuit of neo-liberal modernizing.

There are other ways in which encompassing transnational political and economic systems reshape and sometimes consolidate loyalties and identities drawn from ethnic landscapes. A new pan-"Mixtec" identity, for example, has spanned the primary loyalties to township that Mixtec speakers once held in the state of Oaxaca. It grows from Mixtec migrants' shared experience of border camps in Tijuana and work in the tomato fields of California, Oregon, Florida, and other parts of the United States where transnational agri-business has brought those seasonally migrant workers from Oaxaca together in new collective identity.

Regional identities and subnational popular movements also gain support from one another—much as the Zapatistas have tapped support from within Mexican civil society, from organizations of Native Americans ("Indians") and their supporters throughout the continent, from the Chicano movement, and from sympathizers as far away as Catalunya. They draw support from independent organizations that challenge the state and from non-governmental organizations whose resources and constituencies transcend national controls. While contemporary nation-states are in many instances struggling to reassert their primary claims on citizenship and identity, they are no longer the only game in town in the post cold-war and increasingly transnational order, which is giving rise to new, multivocal solidarities and alliances.

Notes

¹ For an analysis of the roots of the Zapatista rebellion, see *BASTA! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* by George A. Collier and Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello (Food First Books, 1994).

² Even Mexico's oil sovereignty is falling victim to restructuring as the Ernesto Zedillo government contemplates privatization of the state-run petrochemical industry after having pledged oil revenues to U.S. banks to guarantee repayment of the Clinton administration bailout.