

FROM ZAPATA TO THE ZAPATISTA ARMY OF NATIONAL LIBERATION

MIRELA-ADRIANA VIZIRU*

Abstract. *The Zapatista Army of National Liberation has ideologically identified with Emiliano Zapata, who, by the mere existence of this guerrilla, proves that his “posthumous career”¹ in Mexican history is far from being over. Yet the two generations of Zapatista fighters are separated by a century of political, social and economic change. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the influence of the Mexican Revolution on the Zapatista movement of 1994, while also emphasising the particularities of the latter.*

Keywords: *Zapata, EZLN, Mexico, Revolution, Indians, struggle.*

A century has elapsed since the Mexican Revolution of 1910, yet Zapata seems more present than ever in Mexico. The 20th century has begun with the struggle of Zapata for agrarian reform, and has ended with the occupation of several municipalities of Chiapas by Indian peasants claiming indigenous rights, land and freedom. As the caravan organized by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) made its way into Mexico City in the fall of 1997, carrying 1.111 unarmed and masked rebels, aiming to renew negotiations with the government and settle the conflict, supporters cheered them on, shouting that “Zapata lives and the struggle continues!”²

It is well known that the late 20th century Zapatista movement identifies with the ideals of Emiliano Zapata Salazar, military leader of the Mexican Revolution, national hero, guerrilla fighter, symbol of the struggle for social justice, “transgressor of the law”³ and a recurrent reference in folk art and culture. But how and to

* PhD candidate, Doctoral School of Political Science, University of Bucharest; viziru.mirela@yahoo.com.

¹ Phrase used by Samuel Brunk, author of *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata: Myth, Memory, and Mexico's Twentieth Century*.

² “Zapatista rebels arrive in Mexico City”, in *CNN World News*, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9709/12/mexico.zapatista/>, accessed on 05.05.2016.

³ Ziga Vodovnik (ed.), *Ya basta! Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising*, 2004, AK Press, Oakland, Canada, p. 332.

what degree has the Mexican Revolution inspired the indigenous and, ultimately, the Zapatistas? The aim of this paper is to examine the evolution of Mexican Indians' political thought and status from the Revolution up to the rise of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the burst of the conflict in Chiapas, with a special focus on the agrarian and cultural dimensions. In other words, this analysis will try to identify what makes the rebels of the EZLN "Zapatistas" and what other elements have shaped their ideas and goals.

Emiliano Zapata, the Revolution and the Indians

Porfirio Díaz, initially considered a national hero after his important contribution to expelling the French from the Mexican soil in the Battle of Puebla of May 5, 1862, took control of Mexico City in 1876 and led an authoritarian and coercive regime, known as *Porfiriato*, until 1911, when he was forcibly removed from this position. As he aged, the issue of succession became highly pressing, in the context of growing social dissatisfaction and opposition. Although he had claimed he had no intention of running for a new mandate in the 1910 elections, Díaz ultimately changed his mind, despite his "no re-election" previous program, determining the escalation of tensions and, ultimately, the burst of the Revolution⁴.

During the *Porfiriato*, Mexico went through a modernization stage, based on foreign investments and promotion of industry. His thirty-five years' rule insured the much-needed stability after a very troubled political period, characterized by the civil war, the French and American invasions and constant post-independence fighting between centralists and regionalists, conservatives and liberals. Internal peace created a climate of trust and respect for investors, who brought know-how and capital into the country for infrastructure, mining and industrial projects⁵. The authors Evens and Garner have argued that the liberal measures adopted by Díaz have had an immense positive economic and social impact and have introduced Mexico into the industrial, modern world of the 20th century. Therefore, they concluded that his regime has been "distorted", "misunderstood" and unfairly categorized as entirely "malign"⁶.

However, Díaz rule has also been a "virtual dictatorship" that generated an unfair distribution of state wealth, which impoverished the lower classes and achieved political stability at the expense of individual liberties. In fact, Higgins observed that "when confronted with the pressing problem of how to create a strong and peaceful nation, the new generation of liberals adopted policies and practices that took their inspiration from ideas and theories that were anything

⁴ Richard Cavendish, "The ousting of Porfirio Díaz" in *History Today*, Volume 61, Issue 5, May 2011, available at <http://www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/ousting-porfirio-diaz>, accessed on 07.05.2016.

⁵ Travis Evens, "The Porfiriato: The Stability and Growth Mexico Needed" in *Studies by Undergraduate Researchers at Guelph*, available at <https://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/surg/article/view/1776/2415>, accessed on 06.05.2016.

⁶ Paul Garner, *Porfirio Díaz: profiles in power*, 2001, Pearson Education Limited, New York, p. 10.

but liberal”⁷. Progress, if that is the correct term for what happened in Mexico at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, was accompanied by the firm hand of military and police service, which consumed up to 55 percent of the country’s total revenue⁸. Díaz has been particularly criticized for the sale of public land and the conversion of *ejidos* (communal land) into private land, immediately bought by speculators and investors. Soon, *ejidatarios* became landless and forced to work on the land they formerly owned or to migrate⁹. By 1911, this was the case of 90% of Mexican peasants and Indian villages became in the eyes of foreign companies involved in agriculture, mining and railroad construction “the plentiful supply of cheap and obedient labor”¹⁰.

The Indian “worker” was trapped in a labor system that used a variety of ruthless tactics to ensure its survival. One of them was *the enganche* (“the hooking”), consisting in labor recruitment through advancing wages meant to cover living expenses and transportation costs to the newly established cacao, coffee or tobacco plantations. It led to a modern type of enslavement, since workers “rarely accumulated enough to pay back initial loans, were obliged to accept new loans, and, as a result, accumulated more debt”¹¹ and had no other option than to keep working on those plantations. The railways system developed during the *Porfiriato* also made it possible for *enganchadores* (contractors) to recruit the landless population for U.S. based companies. They promised laborers high wages in the rich North but, in reality, after taking care of the transportation and border passing costs, they delivered them into “debt bondage to low-paying US jobs and plantation barracks, under dismal working and living conditions”¹².

Chiapas was no exception. By 1910, up to 10.000 Tzeltal and Tzotzil men from San Cristobal de las Casas were working on the coffee plantations of Soconusco¹³, where the “miracle of modernization” had increased the production from less than 50 tons to 9.200 tons per year in just three decades¹⁴. As Bartra explained, this change could not have been caused by the isolated and economically challenged society of Chiapas, involved for the most part in a sort of self-sustainable agriculture¹⁵. Instead, it was the result of transnational, especially German corporations, financially resourceful, well connected to the international market and difficult to compete with for local farmers.

⁷ Nicholas P. Higgins, *Understanding the Chiapas Rebellion*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2004, p. 92.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

⁹ Camille Guerin Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1996, p. 27.

¹⁰ Higgins, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

¹¹ Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: the Struggle for Land and Democracy*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1998, pp. 49-50.

¹² Erik Camayd-Freixas, *U.S. Immigration Reform and its Global Impact*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013, p. 153.

¹³ Stephen E. Lewis, *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910-1945*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2005, p. 10.

¹⁴ Armando Bartra, *Origen y claves del sistema finquero del Soconusco*, available at <http://www.revis tachiapas.org/No1/ch1bartra.html>, accessed on 08.05.2016.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

Gradually pushed from the most fertile lands towards the cooler, poorer and remote regions, the indigenous population soon discovered it had no other option, in order to survive, than to work seasonally or permanently on the plantations in order to gain a salary and make a living. Once they “voluntarily” got there, the pay system made sure they accumulated enough debt to make them stay. If that did not work, there were always other means of constraint, like coercion, employed with the consent of public authorities – “attempts to escape were punished by physical assault; living conditions were worse than in their (Indians’) villages, with no hygiene and comfort. There were galleys with earthen floors, with wooden bunk beds workers slept on, while they were locked overnight in order to prevent them from escaping. Working conditions were also very tough, because in some *fincas* the duties were excessive and required 12 or 13 hours of labor per day”¹⁶.

Therefore, despite some of the good outcomes and social benefits of the *Porfiriato*, it has remained in the public, especially Indian imagery, as a time of injustice, oppression and humiliation. It was in this context that Zapata would become the symbol of fight for social change.

In 1908, interviewed by U.S. journalist James Creelman, Díaz stated he had no intention to run for another presidential mandate in 1910 and offered to guide and support his successor¹⁷, whoever he may be. This promise, although not ultimately kept, created a space of political involvement for the educated middle class, who responded very well to Francisco Madero’s ideal of “A Real Vote and No Boss Rule” (Sufragio Efectivo, No Reección). Following the staged defeat of Madero by Díaz, he asked the Mexican people to rise in arms against the status quo and attracted a second group, the uneducated rural mass, especially the landless Indian workers who had been burdened with sustaining Díaz’ modernization program and were facing increasing taxation under the control of local bosses. Even though Díaz was forced to resign and Madero was inaugurated president a year later, his liberal project failed, blocked by supporters of the former regime and in 1913 he was assassinated. Yet, although Madero’s reforms did not succeed, change was inevitable, as popular unrest was increasing under the new military regime, ruled by General Victoriano Huerta¹⁸.

The most powerful and charismatic leaders of this movement were Emiliano Zapata and Francisco (“Pancho”) Villa. Zapata, a young mestizo from the state of Morelos, led the villagers in the fight for regaining their ancestral lands, transformed in sugar-cane plantations and against the rule of *caciques*. He was perfectly aware of the national character of their struggle, as he would inform a governmental envoy that “the revolution in Morelos is not a local revolution”¹⁹. The ruthless counter-offensive of Huerta against the rural population only helped

¹⁶ Boris Maranon, Dania Lopez, *Trabajo forzoso en Mexico. La experiencia del peonaje en Chiapas durante los siglos XIX y XX*, p. 9, available at http://actacientifica.servicioit.cl/biblioteca/gt/GT18/GT18_Maranon_Lopez.pdf, accessed on 08.05.2016.

¹⁷ James Creelman, “President Díaz, hero of the Americas”, March 1908, available at <http://fileserv.net-texts.com/asset.aspx?dl=no&id=12939>, accessed on 27.05.2016.

¹⁸ Alan Knight, “The Mexican Revolution” in *History Today*, Vol. 30, Issue 5, May 1980, available at <http://www.historytoday.com/alan-knight/mexican-revolution>, accessed on 27.05.2016.

¹⁹ John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, 1969, Mexico, Siglo XXI Editores, p. 146.

diffuse Zapata's goals, as it unified the fragmented opposition of chiefs, villagers, ranchers and peons²⁰.

Although not keen to any ideology in particular and not much a man of the words, Zapata clarified his political proposal in the Plan of Ayala of November 1911, which accused Madero of having betrayed the revolution he initiated and later Huerta of being a usurper worse than Madero. It terms of agrarian reform, it stated that, "in virtue of the fact that the immense majority of Mexican peoples and citizens are owners of no more than the land they walk on, suffering the horrors of poverty without being able to improve their social condition in any way or to dedicate themselves to Industry or Agriculture, because lands, timber and water are monopolized in a few hands, for this cause there will be expropriated the third part of those monopolies from the powerful proprietors of them, with prior indemnization, in order that the pueblos and citizens of Mexico may obtain *ejidos*, colonies, and foundations for pueblos, or fields for sowing and laboring and the Mexicans' lack of prosperity and wellbeing may improve in all and for all"²¹. The manifest also underlined that if the expropriated ones opposed the nationalization process, they would have the rest of their property confiscated as well²². As expected, Zapata's philosophy gained a lot of support among the rural masses of the South, especially landless peons, who joined his army immediately. However, Brunk explained, as much he was loved by the countryside, he was at the same time hated by the city, especially by the Mexico City press, which portrayed him as "a blood-soaked bandit, a killer of innocents, the Attila of the South"²³.

Hero or villain, in a certain way his political career didn't end on April 10, 1919, when he was assassinated. Not for the peasants who refused to accept his death, nor for the politicians who used his image in order to get the peasants' support while making minimal concessions to their demands²⁴. And definitely not for EZLN, who, almost a century later, according to their communiqués, aspire to accomplish his unfinished promises, – "He (Zapata) took his name from those who have no name, his face from those with no face; he is sky on the mountain.(...) And our road, uncertain and faceless, took its name in us: Zapatista Army of National Liberation. This is the truth, brothers and sisters. This is where we come from and this is where we're going"²⁵.

Change or Continuity?

The violent war between the military and the rebels had a clear winner – the Constitutionalists, because even though "Díaz and Huerta, the champions of the old regime, failed to contain the forces of change and rebellion, the rebels too,

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 166.

²¹ Plan de Ayala, available at <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/johnson/ayala.htm>, accessed on 28.05.2016.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Samuel Brunk, *Emiliano Zapata: Revolution and Betrayal in Mexico*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1995, Introduction, p. xii.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Lynn Stephen, *Zapata Lives!: Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002, p. 166.

both the pioneer city liberals and the popular forces of the countryside proved unable (in the first case) and unwilling (in the second) to fasten their control on the country”²⁶.

The Zapatistas were never long enough in control to implement their reforms. Their most important achievement is considered to be the Article 27 of the Constitution of 1917, promulgated under Venustiano Carranza, which enabled agrarian reform while restricting foreign ownership.

Yet what difference did the Revolution make in the lives of the indigenous peasants of Chiapas? Not much, according to Higgins, who concluded that “the revolutionary victory of 1920 was, for Chiapas at least, no revolution at all”²⁷ because Governor Fernández Ruiz “rescinded the Ley de Obreros, discouraged land reform, and rigged elections”²⁸. Harvey also notes that no essential change occurred in the life of the Indian population, as they were “manipulated by all sides” and “the revolution in Chiapas was essentially about who would control access to Indian land, labor and production”²⁹.

On the national level, change resembled a whole lot to continuity. The authoritarian rule of Díaz was replaced by what would become the 70 years long rule of Partido Revolucionario Institucional, while the positivist economical views of Díaz’s *científicos* gave birth to a system of state corporatism that, in Higgins’ opinion, “seemed to embody the very method of which Comte had dreamt”³⁰.

State corporatism, introduced in Mexico by President Lazaro Cardenas in the 1930s, in the context of the Great Depression and the crash of the U.S. stock market, theoretically represented “a system of interest representation linking the organized interests of civil society with the decisional structures of the state”³¹. In practice, it was a mechanism of state-control that ensured the stability of the regime. From Eisenstadt’s point of view, Mexico developed a type of exclusionary corporatism that, in the countryside, meant “rural residents were compelled to participate in local branches of the official peasants’ union. (...) Peasants who joined the union received carrots in the form of agricultural subsidies, social program, and preferential treatment in applying for land. Those who did not join the PRI-backed organizations got the stick of repression. Resisters were jailed without formal charges (often for months or even longer), and a few were even killed”³². In Chiapas, the peasants (including the indigenous people) were also forced to join the National Peasant Confederation, by the same principles. Rus, Mattiace and Hernández Castillo emphasized that this policy fit right into

²⁶ Alan Knight, “The Mexican Revolution” in *History Today*, Vol. 30, Issue 5, May 1980, available at <http://www.historytoday.com/alan-knight/mexican-revolution>, accessed on 27.05.2016.

²⁷ Nicholas P. Higgins, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Neil Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

³⁰ Nicholas P. Higgins, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

³¹ Adam David Morton, *Revolution and State in Modern Mexico: the Political Economy of Uneven Development*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, Lanham, p. 6.

³² Todd A. Eisenstadt, *Politics, Identity, and Mexico’s Indigenous Rights Movements*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, New York, p. 8.

Chiapas' political history, because "state governors and agencies had historically been closely aligned with landowners, often using state power to ensure a docile, largely Indian workforce on the state's many large landholdings"³³.

In the aftermath of the Revolution, the cult of Porfirio Díaz as hero and state-builder was replaced by the portrait of a ruthless tyrant. "Porfirismo" was replaced by "anti-Porfirismo". Garner states that after the economic crisis of 1980, "anti-Porfirismo" has been replaced by "neo-Porfirismo", which consisted in a positive re-evaluation of his financial strategy, in order to justify the neo-liberal measures taken by the government in order to reduce the devastating impact of the debts. This resulted in a reorientation towards foreign investment and massive privatization, "in stark contrast to the post-Revolutionary orthodoxy of state intervention, nationalization and import-substitution"³⁴. The EZLN responded to the neo-liberal measures of the late 20th century, much like Zapata fought against the effects of Díaz's liberal initiatives and especially against the removal of Article 27 of the Constitution by president Salinas de Gortari, a decision he took in order to prepare Mexico to adhere to NAFTA.

On a cultural level, 19th century liberal racism, defined by "the need to civilize the Indians by incorporating them into the modern agrarian economy"³⁵ was followed by the promotion of Mexico as a mestizo nation, a mixed-race culture. This modern national agenda has paradoxically combined indigenous assimilation with marginalization, both disliked by the Indians, as Sociologist and University Lecturer Franco Gabriel explained for author Natividad Gutiérrez – "The ideology of *mestizaje* emphasizes that it holds power and authority, and this is reflected in all areas of social life. The mestizo culture feels superior to the Indian ones; thus, it justifies the injustice by the fabricated assumption of cultural superiority. Moreover, the mestizo has had a political project of constructing the nation without us, excluding us from participating and making decisions for ourselves. There is no room for Indian history in the making of the nation"³⁶.

Dan La Botz also analysed the negative impact of *indigenismo* as public policy meant to integrate Indians in the Mexican nation and concluded that there is a dangerous duality of this strategy, consisting in the glorification of the Indian past, simultaneous to the "neglect and public humiliation" of the living ones. He argued that "the unassimilated Indians, who represent a minority within the Mexican population, feel genuinely threatened by the state's policies. (...) Those 10 million or so of (Indian) people living throughout Mexico speak 56 different languages. Twenty of those groups have less than 10.000 members and half of them have less than 1.000 members, which means that they are groups in real

³³ Mattiace Rus, and Hernandez Castillo, "Indians and the Corporate State", in *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias*, eds. Jan Rus, Rosalva Aida Hernandez Castillo and Shannan L. Mattiace, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2003, p. 9.

³⁴ Paul Garner, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

³⁵ Neil Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

³⁶ Natividad Gutiérrez, *Nationalist Myths and Ethnic Identities: Indigenous Intellectuals and the Mexican State*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1999.

danger of extinction. For them, assimilation means the death of their people and their culture”³⁷. The EZLN emerged as a force against a cultural approach that aimed at resolving the “Indian question” by eliminating it. Instead, it aimed at bringing these grievances into public spotlight in the search a new model, which would separate the issue of integration from “acculturation” and “assimilation”.

Political Ideas of the “new” Zapatistas

The “new” Zapatistas fight against a political system that they perceive as corrupted, discriminatory and unequal, which they wish to replace with a “just” and “democratic” system. They have emerged in a special context, given the political changes that had already happened in Latin America – in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala armed movements had already taken place and in Nicaragua the Sandinista Revolution had triumphed in 1980³⁸.

Also, it is important to note that the predecessor of EZLN was the EIM (Ejército Insurgente Mexicano), a guerilla secretly organized by some journalists in 1960, which ulterior became the FLN (National Liberation Forces). The latter was a political and military organization whose goal was to transfer the political power to the working class of the Mexican Republic in order to install a popular republic with a socialist regime³⁹.

FLN conceived and published its statute in the context of the revolutions of Nicaragua and El Salvador and, according to the general principles of the statute, it labeled as enemies “imperialism, above all U.S. imperialism, its partners in Mexico, the Mexican bourgeoisie and its armed agents”⁴⁰. Believing that the true purpose of capitalism is the exploitation of the working class, the FLN declared its support towards “the creation of mass organizations that sustain in fact their independence from the bourgeois state and its apparatus, and those whose demands go beyond the framework of economic struggles and are linked to a political struggle that leads to the people taking power in their own hands”⁴¹.

As researcher Anahí Alviso Merino stated, the FLN proposed “a Marxist project” because “its objective was to conquest the political power and install a socialist system that would put an end to the exploitation of workers through the social property of the means of production”. The author also points out to the fact the predecessor of EZLN conceived armed fighting as the revolutionary means of achieving this goal⁴².

Announcing a fight for “democracy, freedom and justice”⁴³ for all Mexicans, the speech of the EZLN has a strong emancipatory and revolutionary dimension.

³⁷ Dan La Botz, *Democracy in Mexico: Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform*, South End Press, 1995, Boston, p. 23.

³⁸ Anahí Alviso Merino, *La guerilla del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional: ¿Una experiencia marxista?*, in *Revista Crítica de Ciencias Sociales y Jurídicas*, accessed on 25.05.2016, available at <http://pendientedemigracion.ucm.es/info/nomadas/8/anhialviso.htm>.

³⁹ John Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas*, The New York Press, New York, 1999, pp. 190-192.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 192-193.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Anahí Alviso Merino, *op. cit.*

⁴³ “Declaratija Junglei Lacandone”, available at <http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/comunicados/1994/1993.htm>.

It conveys the decision of the Zapatistas to take up arms in the name of “national liberation”. More precisely, according to the First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, claiming that they are “the heirs of those who truly forged our nation”, the rebels called the “millions of dispossessed” to join them in this fight, in order “not to die of hunger in the face of the insatiable ambition of a dictatorship for more than 70 years led by a clique of traitors”⁴⁴.

We could draw a parallel between the social and political classification of the Zapatistas and Marx’s and Engels’s ideas in reference to the working class (the proletariat) and the bourgeoisie. In the “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, they talk about the history of a “class struggle” between “oppressors” and “oppressed”⁴⁵. The two classes, the “bourgeoisie” and the “proletariat”, would be “enemies”, “opposed to each other”, but also the foundation of an unequal society. The solution, for Marx and Engels, is “the overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, the conquest of political power by the proletariat”⁴⁶. According to the Zapatistas, they have been struggling for about 500 years against the political class, who they accuse of depriving them of decent living conditions, but also of the political right “to freely and democratically elect their authorities”⁴⁷. From their point of view, the “70 years of dictatorship” refer to the rule of the PRI, whose permanent leadership they consider to be illegitimate. By invoking article 39 of the Magna Carta, the Mexican Constitution, according to which “national sovereignty resides essentially and originally in the people”, the EZLN demanded a change of system through the change of the political class, together with a series of economic, social and political reforms, meant to correct the inequalities they had invoked. To this aim, the General Command of the EZLN distributed in the wake of the uprising ten “Revolutionary Laws” which comprehended guidelines and principles for “war taxes, the rights and duties of “peoples in the struggle”, the rights and duties of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, the agrarian question, women, urban reform, labor, industry and commerce, social security and legal justice”⁴⁸.

Scholars do not agree on whether the EZLN was going to conquer political power to achieve the profound social change it desired. If Anahí Alviso Merino believes that their intentions are not very clearly depicted in their First Declaration, for author John Womack it is obvious that the Zapatistas were “not simply calling for national attention to ignored outrages, but had deliberate, radical plans for taking national power”⁴⁹ and, to this aim, had set their ambition to “defeating the Mexican army and capturing the national capital for the Mexican people”⁵⁰. Despite what their initial position on taking political power

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Marx, Engels, *Manifestul Partidului Comunist*, p. 18, available at https://www.marxists.org/romana/m-e/desc/Marx_Engels_Manifestul_Partidului_Comunist.pdf, accessed on 20.05.2016.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ “Declarația Junglei Lacandone”, available at <http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/comunicados/1994/1993.htm>, accessed on 15.05.2016.

⁴⁸ John Womack, *op.cit.*, p. 250.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 250.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 246.

might have been, it is certain that, in time, the Zapatistas have moved from a revolutionary towards a reformist speech, as they emphasize themselves in the Third Declaration: “in the first one (Declaration), we called upon the Mexican people to take up arms against the bad government, as the principal obstacle to the transition to democracy in our country. In the second one, we called Mexicans to a civic and peaceful effort. This was the National Democratic Convention, which was to achieve the profound changes that the nation demanded. (...) The EZLN pledged its words and its effort to search for a nonviolent transition to democracy”⁵¹.

Consequently, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation is not a Marxist guerilla, but could be considered a movement “inspired” by Marxism. From this perspective, Merino indicates that “Zapatismo is initially characterized by some Marxist ideas, but, as it evolves, it abandons all the elements that are linked to this thought”⁵². In Nick Henk’s opinion, what differentiates the EZLN from the other Latin American guerillas is the fact that, as the movement grew and developed, it has become “less Marxist and more indigenous”⁵³. Indeed, if their first war declaration did not mention “Indians” at all, in time, their speech and political demands have focused more and more on indigenous rights. To this end, negotiations with the government have resulted in the drafting of the San Andres Accords, which have not been, however, implemented by the Mexican administration.

In fact, the Zapatista rebellion is not easy to define ideologically. While many agree it is a leftist revolutionary group, author Jeff Conant underlines the Mayan cultural dimension of their thought and concludes that, despite some classical leftist elements, the Zapatista ideology “is in fact largely informed by ancient collectivist notions belonging to the indigenous cultures themselves” and that “the ideas central to the rebellion are not the Marxist ideas that have predicated many other Latin American insurgencies”, but “native ideas”⁵⁴. By this, he refers to the fact that neo-Zapatismo is characterized by very distinctive symbols within a profound vision of their world, starting with the symbol of Emiliano Zapata, who embodies their “hope for land reform, hope for an indigenous agrarian identity, hope for dignity among Mexico’s embattled and disenfranchised”⁵⁵.

Subcommander Marcos, leader and spokesman of the organization, agrees that the EZLN is “different” from other movements because of its original political proposal. He explained that, unlike any other political organization, they do not seek power. Instead, he underlines that “we do not want others, more or less of the right, center or left, to decide for us. We want to participate directly in the decisions which concern us, to control those who govern us, without regard to their political affiliation, and oblige them to “rule by obeying”. We do not struggle to take power; we struggle for democracy, liberty and justice”⁵⁶.

⁵¹ Anahí Alviso Merino, *op. cit.*

⁵² *Ibidem.*

⁵³ Nick Henck, *Subcommander Marcos, the Man and the Mask*, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 135.

⁵⁴ Jeff Conant, *A Poetics of Resistance: The Revolutionary Public Relations of the Zapatista Insurgency*, AK Press, 2010, Oakland, p. 140.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁵⁶ Subcomandante Marcos, “*What makes us different is our political proposal*”, 30 August 1996, available at http://www.struggle.ws/mexico/ezln/marc_to_cs_se96.html, accessed on 15.05.2016.

Marcos's Zapatistas vs. Zapata's

In Alan Knight's words, despite its outcome, the Mexican Revolution was undoubtedly characterized by "the mobilization of large numbers of people who had hitherto remained on the margin of politics"⁵⁷. So is the EZLN, according to the statements of Comandante Abraham in "The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatista Movement": "The one who brought the idea to our village was a *compa* who is no longer alive, his name was Tomas. (...) The insurgent *compa* arrived with a pamphlet that had a political explanation of the national situation and there it said what exploitation is and all that. (...) We were just a handful, we were young, and little by little we passed the message on to other *compañeros*. (...) The *compas* told us in class that someday we would have to use arms to end the system. We had already tried peaceful ways but nobody paid attention to us"⁵⁸.

Following Emiliano Zapata's philosophy according to which "you must never ask, holding a hat in your hand, for justice from the government of tyrants, but only pick up a gun", Marcos justified EZLN's decision to take up arms and not surrender them following PRI's peace proposals by saying that "white people only listen to Indians if they have a gun in their hand"⁵⁹. Yet, unlike the original Zapatista movement, EZLN scored more points in the media war rather than the military confrontation. Civil society responded with support for their cause, but made it clear that it would not join them in the armed fighting and did not want a war. The innovation of the "new" Zapatistas lies in their flexibility and adaptability, as they understood the message of the civil society and reoriented towards reaching their political goals peacefully, bearing weapons that ensure their survival, but "aspire to be useless"⁶⁰.

The economic and political contexts of the two movements also differ. Zapata's movement was initiated in the state of Morelos, with the support of local farmers against the agricultural policy of the government. The Zapatista uprising of 1994 also fights for the preservation of the right to land property, but as means of survival of the Indian communities of Chiapas in a globalized world. Although the goals of the two movements share economic aspects, in the case of the EZLN, these claims are meant to enable the cultural survival of the Indigenous population, while possibly creating the space for a new political culture, that would ultimately redefine governmentality and democracy.

Conclusion

Modern liberal ideals in Mexico's recent history have been paradoxically achieved through traditional authoritarian practices which, in the case of the

⁵⁷ Alan Knight, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Gloria Muñoz Ramírez, *The Fire & the Word: a History of the Zapatista Movement*, City Lights, San Francisco, 2008, pp. 51-53.

⁵⁹ Nick Henck, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 260.

indigenous population, resulted in an all-time “the carrot or the stick” practice. Disenfranchised at the end of the 19th century, the former Indian peasant became a plantation worker. Economic progress meant not only dependence, hard work and humiliation for the indigenous, but also the disruption of their traditional life.

A century later, faced with the negative impact of the NAFTA agreement, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation identified with Zapata, due to Indians’ agricultural identity, but also because he proved that the ones kept at the margins of politics can have a voice too. And although Zapata was not an Indian, he denounced the tragic consequences of a biased state policy, which favored oligarchs and landowners, and fought for the poor Mexicans’ “right to rights”. Feeling culturally threatened by the promotion of Mexico as a mestizo nation, the Indians of Chiapas reclaimed their statute as forgers of the nation and the recognition of their past, as means towards a dignified future where liberty awaits.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Brunk, Samuel, *Emiliano Zapata: Revolution and Betrayal in Mexico*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1995;
- Harvey, Neil, *The Chiapas Rebellion: the Struggle for Land and Democracy*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1998;
- Higgins, Nicholas P., *Understanding the Chiapas Rebellion*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2004;
- Lewis, Stephen E., *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910-1945*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2005;
- Ramírez, Gloria Muñoz, *The Fire & the Word: a History of the Zapatista Movement*, City Lights, San Francisco, 2008.