International Third World Studies Journal and Review, Volume XIV, 2003

Imagining the Zapatistas: Rebellion, Representation and Popular Culture

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> *The Mexican…seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask*[1]
>
> *— Octavio Paz*

> *…I will take off my ski mask when Mexican society takes off its own mask, the one it uses to cover up the real Mexico…. And once they [Mexicans] have seen the real Mexico—as we have seen it—they will be more determined to change it.*[2]
>
> *— Subcomandante Marcos*

Few events over the last decade have captured the international public imagination as the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, on 1 January 1994. In the years leading up to the rebellion the Mexican government had been largely successful in creating an image of the country as socially and economically stable. Mexico, the government argued, was not only ready to commit to NAFTA, but was on its way to achieving First World status. The events in Chiapas went a long way in shattering this glossy image in showing the world, what Subcomandante Marcos has called the "basement" or "underside" of Mexico.[3]

The contrary image that the Zapatistas portrayed was closer to reality. The scantily armed Indian rebels that emerged from the jungle to take several regional towns by force argued that widespread poverty, landlessness, malnutrition, inadequate heath care, illiteracy, and governmental corruption were better indicators of the "real" Mexico. They demanded land, justice, democratic reforms, and the end of Mexico's oppressive one-party state. Mexico and much of the world stood transfixed in the mid-nineties as the events in Chiapas played out.

The first response of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari was to accuse the rebel forces of not being indigenous. In labeling the Zapatistas as foreign agitators and communists from Guatemala, Salinas believed that there would be little political fallout in calling upon the military to crush the rebellion.[4] The Mexican government and the Zapatista insurgents have not been the only parties offering images of the country, of themselves, and of each other. With its infatuation of the rebels (especially with Subcomandante Marcos), the popular press has also offered up representations of whom the Zapatistas are and what their struggle is about. Above all, the Zapatistas and the media have portrayed the rebellion as an indigenous endeavor with non-ideological political views.

In addition to the ways that the rebellion has been represented by the international media industry, popular images of the rebels have been commodified in merchandise ranging from t-shirts and pens, to dolls and condoms. Indeed, the desperate but powerful Indian rebel hiding behind a ski mask has been made a popular icon with multiple meanings. The commodification of the Zapatistas raises questions about authenticity and the ability of the rebels to have agency outside of the widespread images and representations of the movement available on the commercial market. It will be the aim of this study to explore some of the ways in which the Zapatistas have been represented in popular culture and the mass media. The paper will also examine how such representations square up with the realities of the rebellion by articulating, when necessary, the history of the movement. In other words, the study will attempt to identify where the popular discourse—fueled in large part by the media-savvy Marcos—has embellished or misconstrued certain aspects of, or told different stories altogether about, the Zapatista movement. In the end, the paper will contend that the Zapatista uprising has been as much a war of images, or a propaganda war, as a military endeavor.

A Rebellion Without Ideology?

In the weeks and months following the rebellion in early 1994, the international press formed its own ideas about the aims and ideological underpinnings of the Zapatista movement. "The way millions of Americans got the story," argues journalist Andres Oppenheimer, was that "the Zapatistas were a new phenomenon—a pro-democracy Indian uprising with no ideological overtones."[5] Even *60 Minutes*, aired on CBS, became caught up in the largely uninformed media frenzy. On 21 August 1994, the show opened with the following comment:

> What Robin Hood was to the people of Sherwood Forest, Subcomandante Marcos has become to the people of Mexico—a fighter for the rights of peasants who are trapped in poverty by large landowners.[6]

The program proceeded to insinuate that the Zapatistas were struggling for U.S. style political rights. What *60 Min-*

utes and the rest of the popular press virtually ignored was the possibility that the Zapatistas could be just another well-trained Marxist guerrilla force. Was the rebel leader, Subcomandante Marcos, also without ideology, or was he a media-savvy spinster that possessed an uncanny ability not only to charm the press, but also to play down the more radical aims of the movement by moderating public statements? In portraying the Zapatista rebels as an army of Indian peasants demanding land and democracy, and who were not ideologues, the press omitted important clues that might have led to a more critically informed understanding of the nature of the movement.

Despite the popular claims to the contrary, the Zapatista struggle clearly emerged out of the political left. In his book, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*, Chiapas historian Neil Harvey traces the long and complicated history of indigenous leftist struggles for land and representation in southern Mexico. It was from these movements, especially the leftist urban guerilla organization—the National Liberation Forces (NLF)—that the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) emerged in 1983.

As an organizing force, the EZLN promoted armed struggle over the legal strategies that had been employed by previous organizations such as the Union de Uniones. The legal approach tended to divide and weaken such organizations as members felt that negotiations compromised too much. It is important to note, as Harvey does, that the new activists in the EZLN "avoided imposing yet another political line or ideology on the indigenous communities."[7] This is not to say, however, that many of the mestizo and Indian Zapatista leaders were not thoroughly engrained in socialist ideology.

In the end, the ideological underpinnings of the EZLN emerged as a complex hybrid of traditional Marxism with distinctive indigenous political overtones.[8] Harvey argues that the EZLN had successfully found "new words for old struggles."[9] As Marcos recalls, he and the other mestizo activists in the EZLN had started out as Marxists but went through a transformation of sorts as they interacted with the collective Indian societies.

> We had a very fixed notion of reality, but when we ran up against it, our ideas were turned over. It was like that wheel over there, which rolls over the ground and becomes smoother as it goes, as it comes into contact with the people in the villages. It no longer has any connection to its origins. So, when they ask me: 'What are you people? Marxists, Leninists, Castroites, Maoists, or what?' I answer that I don't know. I really do not know. We are the product of a hybrid, of a confrontation, of a collision in which, luckily I believe, we lost.[10]

As late as 1993, however, Marcos and other leftist leaders had reaffirmed and clearly stated their Marxist views in the NLF's "Declaration of Principles." Among other things, the document stated the goal of the NLF was to "establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, understood as a government of the workers that will stave off counter-revolution and begin the construction of socialism in Mexico."[11] Oppenheimer concludes that the Zapatista army, as the rural wing of the NLF, was designed to begin the revolution in the countryside.

According to the NLF's documents, Zapatista defectors, and sources close to the movement, the group had adopted a Maoist strategy of "prolonged popular war," which would continue throughout the country with massive protests by the civilian population to wear down the government and ultimately topple it. Following that plan, a group of young Marxist philosophy and sociology graduates from the Autonomous Metropolitan University of Mexico had moved to Chiapas in the early 1980s to set in motion the NLF's rural guerrilla front.[12] Such leftist goals and political leanings clearly do not square up with the representations put forward by the popular press' labeling of the Zapatistas as "non-ideological" rebels.

An Indian Rebellion?

In addition to portraying the Zapatista revolt as ideologically vague, the popular press has also contended that the rebellion is a fully indigenous endeavor. Again, it appears that the press has ignored investigating the origins of the EZLN. Perhaps the omission of important information regarding the nature of the movement was merely to create a popular and sellable media story about poverty stricken Indians in southern Mexico struggling for land and democracy. In any case, the press largely neglected to inform the public that the origins and leaders of the rebellion came just as much from mestizo leftist organizers in Mexico City as from the exploited Mayan communities in Chiapas. In short, the media did not tell the entire story.

In pitting the outnumbered landless rebels with aged rifles, toy guns, and makeshift bayonets against the well-armed Mexican army, the television images and press releases were effective in drawing international sympathy to the Zapatista movement. Placing the ill-equipped Indian rebels at the center of action on January 1 was a masterful media ploy. An interview with Marcos reveals how the uprising was choreographed to garner the support of the press. Writes Oppenheimer:

> As Zapatista military leader Subcommander Marcos himself would concede to me later, his military strategy consisted of surrounding San Cristobal with the elite troops armed with AK-47 rifles, Uzi submachine guns, grenade launchers, and night vision devices, which he placed in the four major access roads to the city, while allowing lesser-armed rebel foot soldiers—some of them only armed with sticks, machetes, and hand-carved wooden toy guns—to march toward the center of town and take the municipal palace…. The television cameras would focus on the…ragtag army of

> landless Mayans mostly armed with toy guns…it worked exactly as planned.[13]

To be sure, much of the strength of the Zapatista movement has been their ability to turn the struggle into a propaganda war. As artist/writer Guillermo Gomez Pena notes,

> What made the Zapatista insurrection different from any other recent guerilla movement was its self-conscious and sophisticated use of the media. From the onset, the EZLN was fully aware of the symbolic power of the military actions. They chose to strategically begin the war the day that NAFTA went into effect. And since the second day of the conflict, they placed as much importance on staging press conferences and theatrical photos as on their military strategy. The war was carried on as if it were a performance.[14]

"Indian rights had never been a central part of the NLF's rhetoric," says Oppenheimer.[15] In the "First Declaration of the Lancondon Jungle," issued on New Years Day 1994, the rebels declared war on the "Salinas dictatorship" and demanded land, jobs, housing, food, education, health care, freedom, independence, justice, democracy, and peace. While these were all issues confronting the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, the document makes no references of Indian rights. The declaration instead announced the Zapatistas intention to march on the nation's capital, to defeat the national army, and to topple the government.[16] References referring specifically to the rights of indigenous peoples would only emerge in the subsequent declarations issued by the Zapatistas.[17]

The morning of the rebellion Comandante Felipe, one of the Zapatista head Indian chiefs, held the movement's first press conference. "We have come to San Cristobal de las Casas to do a revolution against capitalism," said Felipe.[18] It was this kind of ideological zeal that Marcos and other rebels would moderate, at least publicly, to make the rebellion more palatable to the international press.

It was only after the Zapatistas had made the worldwide headlines after the first week of fighting, argues Oppenheimer, that Marcos would "start playing down their calls for class struggle and begin to emphasize the Indian nature of the rebellion."[19] In retaliation to Salinas' comment that the Zapatistas were communists from outside of the country and to gain the sympathy of the international press, Marcos and the Zapatista leaders thought it would be better to drop the socialist rhetoric and to cast the rebellion as a genuine indigenous struggle. This was an extremely successful ploy in that it legitimized the rebellion to the world.[20]

Furthermore, by playing up the Indian card, the Zapatista leadership moderated the some of the more radical tenants of the movement. It was these strategic ideological maneuvers that garnered the Zapatistas widespread international support and spared them from being crushed by the military forces of the Mexican government. In this light, the rebellion appears to be just as much a performance act—a war of images—as a military campaign.

Spokesman or Supreme Commander?

Is Marcos a mere spokesman for the committee of indigenous leaders or is he their supreme commander? Despite his alleged submission to the Zapatista village leaders whom he calls his "superiors" and "commanders," Marcos' relationship with the Indians appears more complicated.[21] Historian Dan La Botz has commented that, "because of the EZLN's clandestine existence and state repression, we do not know how democratic the EZLN really is."[22] When pressed by one journalist, Marcos failed to give any substantial example of a time when his indigenous leaders overturned any of his decisions or advice. Because Marcos makes the military decisions for the Zapatistas and is their link to the outside world, the reporter claims that Marcos not only has the upper hand over the rebels, but also leaves little for the indigenous leadership to decide upon.[23]

Perhaps such criticisms are overstated. Many others report that the EZLN is a truly democratic organization and that the Indian committee consults and votes on every minor and major issue. It is somewhat revealing, however, that the Mayans guard Marcos with an almost religious fervor. Reporters often speak of driving for days on poor roads, being stopped at multiple checkpoints, having guns pointed in their faces, hiking through the jungle, and having a complete body search only to wait for days to meet or be ignored by the heavily guarded and much revered Marcos. These same journalists report few difficulties in making contacts with the other Zapatista leaders.

Could it be that the indigenous Zapatistas view Marcos as a millennial messiah of sorts? After all, he trained the rebels and articulated their case to the world. Furthermore, Marcos continues to help guide them in their cause for justice, land, and democracy. One wonders if the Mayans see something more than just a sympathetic middle class mestizo in Marcos. Does he fill a special role in the cosmology and religion of the indigenous peoples? Whether the Indians revere him as sort of savior or as a pragmatic tool to further their cause, his special position within the movement makes him indispensable to the Mayan rebels.

The Zapatistas and Popular Culture

Thus far this paper has tried to wade through some of the popular conceptions and understandings of the rebellion. In evaluating the impact that the Zapatistas have had on popular culture, it appears necessary to also examine how popular culture has affected the movement. In order to save the movement from being annihilated by federal military forces, the Zapatistas had to sell a certain type of self-image

to garner the sympathy of the international press. Indeed, the rebels choreographed a popular culture revolution of sorts to promote their cause. As historian Arthur Schmidt notes,

> [t]he present-day Zapatista uprising in Chiapas demonstrates both an unusual level of resistance and an inventiveness indicative of the potential of popular cultural creativity to link together matters of culture, economics, society, state, and globe.[24]

The Zapatistas' creative figuring of Mexican popular culture straddles tradition and modernity. While their preferred communicative tools—the international press and the Internet—place them in the modern (perhaps postmodern) world, they also play up images of the Mexican past and call for age-old demands. Figuratively speaking, the Zapatistas have made Zapata comfortable with the laptop. Among other things, this refashioning of Mexican popular culture has made quite an impact on the Mexican state project. Historian Anne Rubenstein argues that the Zapatista movement has gone a long way, at least for a time, in wrenching Mexico's collective memory and popular culture from the grasp of the PRI.[25]

Since the mid-nineties, however, public interest in the Zapatistas has waned considerably. Although the rebels continue in their cause, Mexicans appear to be more concerned about unemployment, social and economic problems, crime, and corruption than the demands for democracy and land reform. A poll conducted in Mexico just six months after the initial uprising revealed that Mexicans viewed automobile traffic as a greater issue facing the country than the Zapatista revolt. In fact, the Zapatista rebellion did not even make the top ten answers.[26]

Journalist Joel Simon argues that the Zapatistas failed in garnering public attention throughout the late-nineties because they were not quite savvy enough to keep up with the rapid changes that popular culture demands. He writes:

> For the first year of the Zapatista revolt Marcos did an amazing job of keeping the rebels in the spotlight. Be he should have taken a lesson from Madonna. In today's MTV world, you need to change your image every fifteen minutes to sustain interest. A year after the Zapatista uprising began, the media and the public seemed to lose interest in the Zapatista story.[27]

Could it be that the popular images that the Zapatistas initially sold to the media now keep the rebels pinned down, in the public's view, under a certain stereotype or representation? Has the commodification of such images held back the movement from having real agency? What is an authentic Zapatista?

It seems that popular culture has had both an accelerating and braking effect upon the rebellion's popularity. In a very real sense, the Zapatista movement has been co-opted by popular culture. What initially was their friend is quite possibly now their foe. Because the Zapatistas have been culturally appropriated and commodified in a wide array of merchandise—including t-shirts, buttons, refrigerator magnets, posters, ski-mask condoms, key chains, dolls, pens, and billboard advertisements, to name a few—they have become novelties or museum pieces for consumption. In the public imagination, the Zapatista experience has its place in time and space—it is static. Like the tourist destination that markets itself to the expectations and preconceived understandings of the tourist, the popular culture industry has created and designed the essential and authentic Zapatista for consumption in the public mind.

It is ironic that the Zapatistas have feared and fought against being co-opted by the state, never thinking that they might be equally co-opted by popular culture. It is hard to say which is possibly their worse enemy; that is, which is more debilitating to their struggle. It seems fair to say that when the Zapatistas turned to the media to play up popular images of their movement they entered into a devil's bargain. This bargain gave them international recognition and momentarily spared their movement. In the end, however, the image making spiraled out of their control in a frenzy of commodification. Of course, the violent swings in the Mexican economy during the nineties also exaggerated other national political and social issues and helped to push the rebels to the sidelines.

Zapatista Images and Commodification

The imagery of the Zapatistas, especially that of the masked rebel, have come to have multiple meanings and representations in Mexican popular culture. For journalist Elena Poniatowska, the ski mask "is now an emblem of resistance of the most novel and most bellicose Mexico." [28] Rubenstein argues that the Zapatista mask,

> like Superbarrio's outfit, referred to the beloved sport of lucha libre but also made an implicit promise that they would not allow themselves to be co-opted or used by the state.[29]

As Marcos notes in the epigraph, the Zapatista ski mask represents the feigned state of Mexican affairs or Mexico's modern glossy image. When prodded about why the Zapatistas wear ski masks, Marco responded with the following: "The main reason is that we have to be careful that nobody tries to be the main leader. The masks are meant to prevent this from happening." [30] In the mid-nineties, the mask helped Marcos to find his way into Mexico's rich "activist" popular culture. Pena notes that Marcos

> was undoubtedly the latest popular hero in a noble tradition of activists which includes Superbarrio, Fray Tormenta (the wrestler priest), and Super-Ecologista, all self-proclaimed 'social wrestlers'

> who have utilized performance and media strategies to enter in the political 'wrestling arena' of contemporary Mexico.[31]

Marcos carefully constructed his image to draw on the beloved heroes of Mexican history and draw international sympathy. Pena writes:

> His serious but nonchalant demeanor, adorned with a pipe and a Zapata-style bandolera with bullets that don't match the model of his weapon, made him extremely photogenic. His persona was a carefully crafted collage of twentieth-century revolutionary symbols, costumes, and props borrowed from Zapata, Sandino, Che, and Arafat as well as from celluloid heroes such as Zorro and Mexico's movie wrestler, 'El Santo.' Because of all this, the New York Times christened him 'the first postmodern guerrilla leader,' and newspapers and magazines throughout the world made it a priority to obtain an interview with him. The cult of Marcos was born.[32]

The Zapatista image has not escaped several of the more base commercial aspects of Mexican popular culture. A *Marcondones*, or Marcondoms, advertisement shows the rebel leader Marcos with a condom on his head and reads, "Say no to terrorism. Use Marcodoms against AIDS." [33] A competing Zapatista condom brand, *Alzados* (those that rise up), also carries the image of a masked rebel on the wrapper. The commodification of the Zapatista knows few boundaries.

While Zapatista merchandise can be bought all over the state of Chiapas, Mexico City, and other areas in southern Mexico, one can now purchase a number of souvenirs over the Internet at the Zapatista Cyber-Mercado and several other web-based vendors.[34] Oppenheimer notes that the Zapatista merchandise frenzy began because the presence of the host of reporters that descended upon Chiapas following the rebellion. He writes:

> What few people outside Chiapas knew is that the Zapatista paraphernalia craze wasn't the truly spontaneous phenomenon that most foreign correspondents found ourselves reporting with wide-eyed amazement. Rather, it was a textbook case of self-fulfilling media coverage.... [t]he hundreds of war correspondents from throughout the world…were …looking for new angles to keep the story in the front pages. What viewers didn't know—and many reporters found inconvenient to acknowledge—was that the merchandising phenomenon had been created by ourselves.[35]

Summary

Image making has been an essential component of the Zapatista movement. Indeed, the image conscious and media savvy nature of the rebellion sets it apart in both popularity and originality from the other rebel movements in Latin America. Understanding that the Zapatista ideology stems as much from leftist mestizo urban intellectuals as it does from the impoverished rural Indians of Chiapas allows for a more fluid and revealing rendering of the movement. For the Zapatistas, the image of the revolt— that of the poverty-stricken ideologically vague Indian—has been just as important as the goals of the revolt. With the aid of the international press, the aims and images of the Zapatistas have often been blurred in the public mind.

Like a fad that has seen its day and then gone out of fashion, the Zapatistas brought their struggle to the world only to find that in a relatively short amount of time their cause would begin to fade into obscurity. While the rebels remain organized, active, and continue to make grassroots progress for the Mayan peoples of Chiapas, they no longer command the attention of the world press, let alone the Mexican populace. The Zapatistas made a devil's bargain with popular culture: in selling an image of themselves they were able to bring a short-lived international attention to their cause which also spared them from being annihilated by the Mexican federal forces. The down side of the bargain came when the Zapatistas were not able compete with other major national issues or keep up with the rapidity and mutating nature of popular culture. In a sense, the Zapatistas have become victims of their own imaginings.

Endnotes

1. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 29.
2. Medea Benjamin, "Interview with Subcomandante Marcos," in *First World, Ha Ha Ha!: The Zapatista Challenge*, ed. Elaine Katzenberger (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), p. 70.
3. See Andres Oppenheimer, *Bordering on Chaos: Mexico's Roller-Coaster Journey Toward Prosperity* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1996), p. 52.
4. John Warnock, *The Other Mexico: The North American Triangle Completed* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1995), p. 258.
5. Oppenheimer, p. 44.
6. *60 Minutes*, CBS News, 21 August 1994.
7. Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 164.
8. Oppenheimer, p. 49.
9. Harvey, p. 164.
10. Subcomadante Marcos, quoted in Harvey, p. 167.

11. National Liberation Forces, “Declaration of Principles,” 1993, quoted in Oppenheimer, p. 48.
12. Oppenheimer, p. 45.
13. Ibid., p. 25.
14. Guillermo Gomez Pena, “The Subcomadante of Performance,” in Katzenberger, p. 90.
15. Oppenheimer, p. 45.
16. “First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle” at <http://www.ezln.org./documentos/1994/199312xx.en.htm>.
17. The Declarations of the Zapatistas are posted for reading in several different languages at <http://www.ezln.org/documentos/index.html>.
18. Comandante Felipe, see Oppenheimer, pp. 19–20.
19. Oppenheimer, p. 47.
20. It is interesting to note that earlier indigenous rebellions in Mexican history were not considered “legitimate” *because* of their Indian nature. The Zapatista rebellion only gained legitimacy when the leaders emphasized the indigenous aspects of the movement.
21. For the full quote stating that the indigenous leaders are his “superiors” and “commanders,” see Subcomandante Marcos, letter to *Proceso, La Jornada, El Financiero, and Tiempo*, as printed in *El Financiero*, 24 January 1994, p. 54.
22. Dan La Botz, *Democracy in Mexico: Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), p. 39.
23. Oppenheimer, p. 73.
24. Arthur Schmidt, “Making It Real Compared to What? Reconceptualizing Mexican History Since 1940,” in *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 50.
25. Anne Rubestein, “Mass Media and Popular Culture in the Postrevolutionary Era,” in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, ed. Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 670.
26. Jorge Matte Langlois’s polls, quoted in Oppenheimer, pp. 152–53.
27. Joel Simon, *Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997), p. 110.
28. Elena Poniatowska, “Forward: Taking Mexican Popular Culture by Storm,” in *Fragments of a Golden Age,* p. xiv.
29. Rubestein, “Mass Media and Popular Culture in the Postrevolutionary Era,” in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, p. 670.
30. See Harvey, p. 6.
31. Guillermo Gomez Pena, “The Subcomadante of Performance,” in *First World, Ha Ha Ha!*, p. 90.
32. Ibid., p. 91.
33. Katzenberger, p. 97.
34. Zapatista Cyber-Mercado, <http:casabonampak.com/zapa.html>.
35. Oppenheimer, pp. 29–30.