

Ensayos de Reseña/Review Essays

Globalism, Localism and Neo-Zapatism

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- *La otra frontera; identidades múltiples en el Chiapas poscolonial*, by Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo. México: CIESAS, Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2001. English edition: *Histories and Stories from Chiapas; Border Identities in Southern Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- *Mayan Visions; The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization*, by June C. Nash. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.
- *¡Zapata Lives!; Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico*, by Lynn Stephen. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002.

The three books under review here have in common that they are about Chiapas, the role and impact of Neozapatismo and the struggles of peasants and indigenous people for a better future, against all odds. And all three of them, in one way or another, touch upon what Stephen calls the turn from rebellion to the low intensity war that started in February 1995 when the then President Zedillo ordered the arrest of the Zapatista high command and massive army occupation of a large part of the ‘conflict zone’. The Zapatista command escaped capture but the militarization of the region has had deleterious effects while attempts to renew peace talks, in the context of Mexico’s ‘democratic transition,’ soon stranded. However, besides reviewing and providing an update on the ongoing conflict, these books are significant for many reasons, especially for the questions they raise and the themes they address.

June Nash first visited Chiapas in the late 1950s when she did fieldwork in the Mayan community of Amatenango del Valle. In the course of her career she not only focused on Chiapas but also studied tin miners in the Bolivian highlands and General Electric workers in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Such field experiences contributed to shaping her ethnographic view of the world system and the ways it has threatened the subsistence base of indigenous cultivators and miners and transformed Pittsfield into an industrial ghost town. One of the fascinating aspects of her book is the way in which she discusses the transformation of her own views on what anthropology is all about in tandem with the transformations she could observe in the course of time during revisits to her field sites such as Amatenango.

Her first entry into the field was oriented by Chicago-school inspired community studies, and although this provided important insights, the model of a harmonious, closed corporate community soon came apart once she tried to locate it in history and in the wider economic and political context. This does not lead her, however, to simply jettison community studies, but rather to recognize the structural imperatives of colonial and postcolonial systems in which indigenous peoples

are encapsulated, as well as the indigenous search for a cultural basis from which to defend themselves and generate collective action (p. 39). On the one hand Nash traces the breakdown of the economic and political supports for semi-subsistence small-plot agriculture that provided the substantive base for the 'institutional revolutionary community' that emerged in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. On the other hand this crisis, in a context of globalization and the turn to neoliberal policies, also reflects the forces of resistance and the search for alternatives rooted in what Nash calls 'the habitus of community', and in substantive economies. Resistance and the increasingly military response on the part of the Mexican government has contributed to a convergence of indigenous advocates and international human rights advocates as protagonists in a dialogue on alternatives to the prevailing 'new world disorder'.

I will return to some of the issues addressed by Nash later on, relating them to the perspectives elaborated in the other studies under review. One thing that should be noted about Nash's book, which – it should be stressed – is fascinating, is that it should have had more careful editing before going to press. Elimination of inaccuracies would have enhanced the usefulness of the text and avoided confusion.¹

Whereas the Chiapas rebellion is usually depicted as rooted in the indigenous population of the Tojolabal, Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Ch'ol Maya sub-groups, Aída Hernández draws attention to the apparent eclipse and the near-miraculous resurgence of a further local identity, that of the Mam who have kept somewhat aloof from the post-1994 conflict. Hernández first arrived in the southern border region, where as a member of a multidisciplinary team assisting refugees from Guatemala she would discover the Mam, in 1986. She arrived in a border community of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas, which caught one's attention for being the only settlement in the region with pastel-coloured brick houses. Officially the community was classified as a mestizo community and in her field diary of that time the author noted that this group of 'people without culture' was one more result of the onslaught of the 'ethnocidal forces' of the Protestant 'sects', followed by an 'anti-imperialist reflection' (p. 21). However, on becoming more familiar with the villagers she found that there was more to the story.

In this study she recounts the painful chronicle of identity being repressed and regained. It begins with the policies of the forced integration of the 1933-1950 period, when traditional dress was destroyed to force integration into the Mexican nation. In this period, the Mam were evangelized by the Presbyterian Church, which brought them the message that they could be 'Mexican, Mam and Presbyterian' all at the same time. This resulted in a curious brand of nationalism by which the villagers could confirm that they were 'more Mexican than the Catholics who criticize government'. During the 1950-1970 period the Mam were influenced by the national development policies and increasingly migrated to the coastal coffee plantations as harvest hands. In that context onchocerciasis or river blindness, transmitted by the coffee fly, became widespread among them. When the population was visited for the first time in that period by teams of anthropologists to collect material to include the Mam in the national cultural patrimony (that is incorporate them into the National Anthropology Museum exhibit), they also signalled the plight of those infected by onchocerciasis. By the end of this period a group of Mam had converted to the sect of Jehovah's Witness and split off from the com-

munity to establish themselves in the Lacandón Selva, where the new faith served as a vehicle for the development of an anti-state and anti-nationalist discourse that has sustained their distinct identity but also has promoted quietism.

By 1970 official indigenist policy started to change as the emphasis on assimilation or the forging of a mestizo nation gave way to a greater recognition of multiculturalism. Such shifts opened the way to new identity politics as expressed in Mam dance groups or experiences with small coffee-grower cooperatives, which soon generated critical distancing from official discourse about the indigenous people. Conditions changed with the advent, in 1989, of the Salinas government with its double-edged policies of neoliberalism and the PRONASOL programme, which helped the Mam to venture into the production of organic coffee. The success of this endeavour had the paradoxical effect of muting critique of neoliberalism. After the 1994 rebellion and in the context of the low intensity war waged by the Mexican government, the Mam coffee-growers have continued to receive preferential treatment by government agencies, which has reduced their potential to establish alliances with independent organizations. This may be a hazard in a context where government-promoted paramilitarization induces polarization and a sharpening of differences in the face of an alternative pluralist project.

While Hernández thus highlights the intricacies of identity and identity politics, Lynn Stephen, through a comparative study of two locations in Chiapas and two locations in Oaxaca, seeks to ground the locally different conceptions and meanings of Zapatism and the figure of Emiliano Zapata by relating them to local experiences with the state and its land reform agencies. After all, we are confronted with the paradox that President Salinas invoked Zapata in marketing his neoliberal end-of-the-land-reform cum privatization programme, presenting it as another step toward peasant liberation and autonomy (as free market agents), while the Chiapas rebels also invoked Zapata in mounting their resistance to precisely these same policies of neoliberalism and globalization. This would suggest that, although the figure of Zapata has been 'sanitized' and incorporated into official nationalist discourse, the monologic voice of the Nation has been reworked and challenged by the incorporation of a different kind of Zapata in a multiplicity of 'nation views' from below. Such multiplicity points to the instability of hegemony and the ways in which both official and local views of the nation are forged through selective traditions (and local history) that sustain, as it were, a variable geography of identity and nationhood. The challenge posed by such a variety of nation views, and which was brought home by neo-Zapatismo, is the rethinking of the Mexican nation as a multiethnic one in response to movements for indigenous rights and autonomy or the introduction of something like 'flexible citizenship' that holds out the hope for a more equitable and inclusive Mexico.

The study is organized in three broad sections. The first not only contains an extensive reflection on the position of the anthropologist in a context of conflict, a point to be taken up later, but also an outline of government construction of the figure of Emiliano Zapata, centring on his contradictory official appropriation as the hero of Lázaro Cárdenas's *agrarismo* in the 1930s and as a trade-mark for Salinas's counter-reform in the 1990s. The other two sections are dedicated to extensively contextualized case studies of two ejidos and neozapatista strongholds in Chiapas (Guadalupe Tepeyac and La Realidad) and two ejidos in Oaxaca (Santa

María del Tule and Unión Zapata). In retracing the local histories of ejido formation, the author makes it plausible that in the Chiapas ejidos Zapata has finally been transformed into the icon of resistance and the struggle for land, as represented by the hybrid figure of *Votán Zapata*, who is a synthesis of Zapata and a supposedly Tzeltal mythical figure. Whereas land reform advanced slowly and with great difficulty in Chiapas, the experience of ejido formation in Oaxaca was distinct and ejido grants were obtained with relative ease by the communities studied. As a result, President Cárdenas, state agencies and officials came to be identified as executors of the original revolutionary Zapatista agrarian reform programme. In this case state officials came down on the side of the 'good guys' with Zapata. Local political culture thus became marked by the paradox of being 'pro-Zapatista and pro-PRI', although this identification was eroding by the turn of the century.

From somewhat different perspectives the three books cast light on a variety of issues including questions regarding community, identity, the nation and resistance as well as the role of the researcher in relation to his/her research object. Whereas Stephen and Hernández basically focus on the historical trajectories of different groups to explain their current position in relation to the Mexican nation and the Zapatista rebellion, Nash seeks to situate her contribution in a 'global anthropology' perspective. To do so she briefly reviews over forty years of anthropological work and critical debate on anthropological theory. Although she acknowledges the contribution of poststructuralism and postmodernism, she also makes a strong case for looking beyond 'cultural' issues, and not erasing issues of power and the distribution of material resources from anthropological analysis. While global integration has disrupted old bases for collective action, new actors have emerged, particularly 'women' and 'ethnic groups', due to the special responsibilities these groups bear in the new structural conditions they have encountered (p. 20). Indigenous peoples and women thus appear as main protagonists in the defence of the right to live and of substantive economies or as the inventors of counterplots to the dominant world (dis-)order. While in the other two books this global dimension is also present, the focus lies more on the process of nation building and its failures, and in both cases, specific attention is paid to gender aspects. Thus all three books, with somewhat different emphases, delve into the complexities of ethnic identity and identity politics. Their intersections with class, gender and religious aspects make for continually changing representations of identity in the struggle for the right to live and build a place in a new type of 'nation-state'.

The three books are all in some way 'engaged' and Stephen, in particular, seeks to spell out the implications of doing fieldwork in a context of conflict, which forces the anthropologist to become a 'witness' rather than a mere 'observer'. Her observations reflect the changing relationship between anthropologists and the 'objects' of their research. Each time it becomes more clear that these 'objects' are agents and that they demand that the researcher take a position in the frictions and conflicts they have among themselves and the wider, dominant society. The 'neutrality and objectivity' desired by classical field guides is increasingly difficult to uphold, if it ever really existed as more than a coveted fiction.

This poses new challenges to the anthropologist doing fieldwork now because it implies committing oneself to what used to be viewed as an 'object' of research,

while at the same time guarding the critical distance needed for anthropological work. The idea of commitment goes beyond the mere awareness of being present in the field in that it involves assisting in publicizing human rights abuses and taking responsibilities in a range of small actions that would usually be considered undue interference in 'the field'. This includes returning the first research products to the people under study in a form they have requested. As Stephen rightly observes, one cannot simply go into the field and out of it again since the field is all-encompassing. Aside from their contribution to the understanding of the complexities of the conflict in Chiapas, the three books thus also pose a series of questions that will require further reflection by anthropologists on the ways of practicing anthropology in a globalizing world.

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Note

1. Let me mention just a few examples. The discussion of the constitutional recognition of the pluricultural make-up of the Mexican nation (p. 49) is inaccurate and confusing. It suggests that such recognition was already present in the 1917 Constitution whereas the paragraph on multiculturalism was only added to Constitutional Article 4 in 1992, and almost at the same time that Article 27 on agrarian reform was modified, bringing redistributive land reform to a close and opening the way for the privatization of land distributed after the revolution. Whereas the reform of Article 27 is discussed later (p. 27), the author fails to note that the recognition of multiculturalism through the reform of Article 4 was as much, and perhaps paradoxically, a part of the reform package promoted by the Salinas de Gortari government. The author also discusses the 1974 Indigenous Congress in San Cristóbal but she refers to the event as 'the Indian National Congress (CNI)' (p. 121). The 1974 Congress indeed was an important event, also for its repercussions on the national level, but it was a Chiapas affair and not an Indian National Congress (CNI). A National Indigenous Congress (CNI) only emerged in October 1996 to pressure for implementation of the agreements reached between the EZLN and government delegates in February that year, the *Acuerdos de San Andrés*. Throughout the book the acronym for *Solidaridad Campesina Magisteral* is misspelled as SOCAMO instead of SOCAMA. Note 16 to page 17 returns almost literally in the main text on page 19. Such errors, misspellings and inexactitudes unfortunately affect the usefulness and call into question the reliability of an otherwise fascinating account.