

The Internationalization of Zapatismo

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In George Collier and Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello's *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*, they state that ". . . the Zapatistas have had some of their greatest successes outside of Chiapas in the arenas of national and international civil society."¹ While the Zapatista movement is local, in that its armed struggles and pointed actions are confined to Mexico, and primarily the Chiapas region, in a figurative, though nonetheless significant sense, the rebellion has exploded beyond Mexico's borders and "Zapatismo" has gained an international dimension.

Since the January 1994 uprising there has been a swelling of international support for the Zapatistas, evinced in a plethora of Internet sites dedicated to their cause, increased foreign presence and interest in Chiapas, and NGOs throughout the Americas and Europe pledging their support for Zapatismo. This support has been more than just a natural, sympathetic response of concerned global citizens to struggle; it has amassed in part due to the EZLN's (the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) concerted efforts to promote their cause internationally. The EZLN, and especially its leader Subcommandante Marcos, have been acutely aware of the power of foreign opinion and have realized that from it there is much to gain. This paper will explore the strategies the EZLN has used to "export" their cause, image, and rebellion, and the ways in which the resulting international publicity has impacted the Zapatista movement and the course of events which have transpired in Mexico since the 1994 uprising.

The Zapatistas have capitalized on modern means of communication and technology and have used the Internet to showcase their demands and gain international sympathy.

¹ George A Collier and Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland: First Food Books, 1999), 170.

Indeed, what differentiates the Zapatista rebellion from other rural movements for self-determination is its technological wizardry and the subsequent speed with which information has been distributed.² Collier and Quaratiello state that the EZLN, “. . . with their unusual blend of Internet sophistication and rural guerilla tactics . . . drew international attention to the plight of those at the losing end of Mexico’s economic globalization.”³ Despite the Mexican state’s early efforts to limit press coverage of the 1994 uprising, in an attempt to confine word of the calamity to the highlands and jungles of southeastern Mexico, interviews with rebels conducted by Mexican and international journalists flashed around the world via fax and the Internet and printed press.⁴ Ever since the 1994 uprising the EZLN has consistently released its communiqués and declarations over the Internet. Such communiqués bear no EZLN copyright, and websites encourage users to further their dissemination.⁵ Subcommandante Marcos and other prominent citizens Zapatistas have been remarkably prolific in their writing, and numerous communiqués are explicitly addressed to foreign governments, their citizens, and the international press.⁶ For example, a communiqué from 17 January 1994 is addressed to President Bill Clinton and American citizens, and reads: “We address you to inform you that the federal government of Mexico is using the economic and military aid that it receives from the people and the government of the United States of America to massacre the indigenous people of Chiapas . . .”⁷ The Zapatistas’ appeal to individuals beyond Mexico’s borders could not be more obvious, nor more direct.

² Harry Cleaver, “The Chiapas Uprising and the Future of Class Struggle in the New World Order,” February 1994, <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/facstaff/Oeaver/chiapasuprising.html>.

³ Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 155.

⁴ Harry Cleaver, “The Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of Struggle,” <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/zaps.html>.

⁵ <http://www.ezln.org/acerca.en.html>

⁶ See, for example, communiqués from the CCRI-EZLN from January 29 and 31, and February 15 and 16, in *Shadows of Tender Fury* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995).

⁷ Subcommandante Marcos, Communiqué, 17 January 1994, in *Shadows of Fury*, 75.

The steady stream of information coming from the EZLN has in turn been organized, sorted, and re-disseminated by a multitude of independent organizations.⁸ Thousands of web sites with endless links have sprung up – not official EZLN sites, but nevertheless devoted in the vision – which champion the Zapatista cause and spread awareness. Witty and serious communiqués catch the mind, artsy and not-so-artsy photographs of clandestine, masked rebels catch the eye, and live, ringing recordings of rebels’ speeches catch the ear. From the Canadian Solidarity Alliance for the Zapatistas to the Cincinatti Zapatista Coalition; from the Irish Mexico Group to the Plataforma de Solidaridad con Chiapas de Madrid; from the Russian site of Marcos and the EZLN to the Zapata--Mexico Solidarity committee of Amsterdam; and from the Zapatista Solidarity Collective of Mel-bourne to the Coordinamiento Zapatista per l’Italia, the cyber-presence of the Zapatistas is excep-tionally international. Various online guides provide unseasoned users with assistance in navigating through the manifold sites devoted to Zapatismo. Such sites encourage users to sign and pass on petitions and to contact their governments to express concerns over human rights abuses in Mexico. Together, these groups form a cyber network that is on standby to initiate protests through email and letter writing campaigns if at any moment the Mexican government hints at any military action against the Zapatistas.⁹ The EZLN has used the media so effectively that their rebellion has been characterized as the “*first informational guerilla movement* [emphasis in original],”¹⁰ with the guerillas in turn dubbed as the “first postmodern revolutionaries.”¹¹

International support for the Zapatistas is not only “virtual.” The massive dissemination of information through the Internet and the print media has led to significant physical mobilization beyond Mexico’s borders. In the wake of the 1994 uprising, citizens demonstrated across North America and Europe, usually in front of Mexican embassies and

⁸ Cleaver, “The Chiapas Uprising and the Future of Class Struggle.”

⁹ Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 171.

¹⁰ Manuel Castells, quoted in Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 168.

¹¹ “Zapatistas Take Prague?,”

<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/img/reveal/prague.html>.

consulates.¹² The Zapatistas have Chicano support groups in California, a Zapatista consulate in Barcelona, and among thousands of sympathizers throughout France, Danielle Mitterand claims herself to be a fervent Zapatista supporter.¹³ Such international support was clearly demonstrated in February 1995 when Mexican President Zedillo revealed the identities of a number of leading Zapatistas, including Subcommandante Marcos, issued warrants for their arrests, and, in response, pro-Zapatista demonstrations surged across North America and Europe, making, in the words of John Womack, “Marcos an international pop idol and the Indians of Chiapas globally famous and fantastically attractive.”¹⁴

Such sympathetic groups across the Americas and Europe are appealed to by the FZLN, the Zapatista National Liberation Front – the non-violent, politico-civilian offspring of the EZLN, which, despite subsequently faltering, came into existence on 1 January 1996 with lofty goals.¹⁵ While the inauguration speech of the FZLN focused on its role within Mexico, it also articulated an international role by claiming that its struggle was a part of “the new international movement that opposes neo-liberalism . . .” and that through its efforts in Mexico, it hoped to contribute to the “victory of all the peoples of the planet in favor of humanity against neo-liberalism . . .”¹⁶ The following November, Javier Elorriaga, protagonist of the FZLN, and his wife Subcommandante Elisa, headed to Paris and Strasbourg to promote the FZLN.¹⁷

International awareness has also led to an increase in the presence of foreigners and human rights activists in Chiapas despite close surveillance by the Mexican state. As well through the dissemination of information over the Internet the EZLN has held several international conventions in Chiapas in order to further promote their cause, make further

¹² Cleaver, “The Chiapas Uprising and the Future of Class Struggle.”

¹³ Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 171.

¹⁴ John Womack, Jr., *Rebellion in Chiapas: an Historical Reader* (New York: The New York Press, 1999), 296.

¹⁵ Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 171.

¹⁶ “Cuadernillo Num. 1: Documentos de Discusión para el Congreso de Fundación del Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional,” in *Rebellion in Chiapas* by Womack, 336.

¹⁷ Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas*, 330.

connections with the international community, and formulate alternatives to the neoliberalism embraced by so many nations' governments. The National Convention for Democracy was convened in August 1994 in the Lacandón jungle at a site symbolically christened 'Aguascalientes' in honour of the town where the Mexican Revolution's first constitutional convention was held in 1914, resulting in the radical Revolutionary Constitution of 1917. Hundreds of delegates and reporters from, among other countries, China, New Zealand, and South Africa, were hosted lavishly by Mexicans.¹⁸ Despite a torrential rainstorm, most returned home committed Zapatista supporters.¹⁹ Networks created at the convention re-mained intact a year and a half later, and orchestrated protests throughout not only Mexico, but also the United States and Europe when the Mexican army entered Zapatista territory in February 1995.²⁰ In April 1996 the Continental Encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism was held in the canyon community of La Realidad. Hundreds of famous foreigners, some influential intellectuals, others reporters, and still others celebrities, participated in discussions and forums and mulled over concepts of democracy and liberty. Importantly for the Zapatistas, in the wake of the foreign stars came the foreign media.²¹ Four months later a second convention, this time the Intercontinental Encounter, was again held in La Realidad. Like its predecessor, it attracted thousands of delegates and over three hundred foreign media from fifty-two countries.²² As the event unfolded it became a "five-ring surrealist circus for the media," in which the primary pursuit seemed to be, according to one reporter, "raising an international human shield against the government to protect the Zapatistas for yet another while."²³ The presence of notable foreigners meant more than foreign coverage; their presence ensured that the government

¹⁸ Alma Guillermoprieto, *Looking for History: Dispatches from Latin America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 219.

¹⁹ Lynn Stephen, "The Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the National Democratic Convention," *Latin American Perspectives* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 1995): 95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas*, 317.

²² *Ibid.*, 318.

²³ *Ibid.*, 319.

dared not interfere with the conventions' activities because of the negative publicity which would likely ensue if it did.²⁴

The effects of the EZLN showcasing their cause and rebellion to the international community have been significant. Increased international awareness of what is going on domestically in Chiapas has led to increased international scrutiny of what is going on in Mexican politics. Collier and Quaratiello claim that the increase in international awareness of the situation in Chiapas was in part responsible for the "intense scrutiny" of the 1994 governmental elections.²⁵ Furthermore, with the onset of neoliberal restructuring, there has come into existence a political space for non-partisan activism, such as church-based activism, human rights activism, and political opposition, to develop in Mexico independent of the ruling party.²⁶ Because of increasing internationalism, or the "new world order," such organizations can be networked with counterparts throughout the world, and, acting together, exert greater pressure on the Mexican government for reform and democracy.²⁷ Because the Mexican state covets international recognition to such a degree and seeks to be accepted by the international community in the "modern order," such leverage can be efficacious.²⁸ Collier and Quaratiello point to the potential reforms that citizens of countries other than Mexico can initiate by pressuring their own governments to recognize the oppressive policies of the Mexican state and act with according conscience. Collier and Quaratiello state: "In the emerging global order, citizens of the world are more likely to 'buy Marcos' than to 'buy Mexican' – both figuratively and literally, such as by pressuring their own governments to accept or reject trade agreements with Mexico – if Mexico is seen as violating the rights of citizens and minorities."²⁹

The March 1996 San Andrés Peace Accords between the federal government and the EZLN, moderated by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, are indicative of the power of this leverage. As a

²⁴ Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 171.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 163.

result of increased foreign pressure following President Zedillo's issuing of a warrant for the arrest of Subcommandante Marcos, the federal government legislated a framework for dialogue.³⁰ Though far from accommodating the demands of the Zapatistas, the Mexican government continued its dialogue with the EZLN because it recognized the importance of public opinion, especially public foreign opinion, and sought to at least appear as though it had peaceful intentions, in order to reduce local, national, and international support for the Zapatistas.³¹ Subcommandante Marcos, too, was aware of the Zapatistas' broader image in relation to the dialogue, and subsequently stated that, "The dialogue allowed the Zapatistas to make themselves known, to enter into contact with a lot of people, especially through the media . . ."³² Still, though, international support and awareness can only go so far; despite international outcry the Mexican army continues to have a strong and repressive presence in Chiapas. The Mexican army in turn, though, can also only go so far: the EZLN, by expertly advocating their cause internationally has achieved a certain degree of leverage because the Mexican public and the international community, concerned and aware, will not accept a genocidal war in Chiapas and an annihilation of the EZLN.³³ Indeed, as Collier and Quaratiello state, international support has been crucial to the EZLN's survival.³⁴

Beyond amassing international awareness and support, Subcommandante Marcos speaks of the notion of "Zapatismo" as having an international dimension, not just in terms of foreigners supporting EZLN activity in Chiapas, but in terms of a convergence of values with other rebel groups in other countries.³⁵ Subcommandante Marcos articulated his conceptions of "Zapatismo" in an interview with French intellectual Yvon Le Bot, amidst the goings on of the 1996 Intercontinental Encounter in La Realidad. That the EZLN high command agreed to be interviewed by Le Bot indicates how intent it was upon promoting

³⁰ Ibid., 189n.

³¹ Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas*, 316.

³² Subcommandante Marcos, "Marcos's Reflections: Just Another Organization or Something Truly New? La Realidad, August, 1996," quoted in Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas*, 321.

³³ Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 167.

³⁴ Ibid., 171.

³⁵ Subcommandante Marcos, "Marcos's Reflections," 325.

an “engaging image in Europe, especially in France.”³⁶ In the interview, Subcommandante Marcos referred to a notion of Zapatismo that goes beyond the EZLN, an international Zapatismo that began to appear in 1995 and gained strength following the two conventions in La Realidad.³⁷ He discusses how in the immediate aftermath of the 1994 uprising the international community did not express great interest in Zapatismo, “we didn’t interest the great world outside, not like now. Some time had to pass for Zapatismo to make itself known on the outside, to be digested, assimilated.”³⁸ Subcommandante Marcos loosely describes international Zapatismo as a “phenomenon” which goes beyond simply showing solidarity with citizens of Chiapas and encompasses a set of universal values which other minorities can draw upon in their respective struggles.³⁹

Thus, it is clear that Zapatismo, while exerting military pressure only in Chiapas, has nevertheless become internationalized. The Zapatistas have taken advantage of the most modern means of communication and technology, especially the Internet, and through prolific writing and copious publication of communiqués, have provided interested outsiders with a wealth of information to further disseminate. Indeed, the Zapatista’s cyber-presence is extraordinary. The Zapatistas have co-ordinated a number of large-scale conventions in Chiapas, attended by notable foreigners, whose presence ushered in the foreign media. The impacts of internationalizing Zapatismo have been significant: increased international awareness has led to increased scrutiny of the Mexican state’s domestic behaviour, and the increased presence of foreigners in Chiapas has curbed, in some cases, the army’s activities. The Mexican government’s drive to achieve recognition in the international community means that foreign governments have a certain amount of leverage; they can pressure for reform and respect for human rights by adjusting trade relations accordingly. In the midst of the international attention being drawn to the EZLN and Chiapas, Subcommandante Marcos has become a powerful icon. Assisted by his eloquence and elusiveness, his black

³⁶ Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas*, 319.

³⁷ Subcommandante Marcos, “Marcos’s Reflections,” 324 – 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 325.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

masks and unwavering determination, he has amassed millions of admirers far beyond the borders of Mexico, no doubt inciting loyal allegiance from leftist sympathizers the world over. Despite international fame and widespread international recognition of the legitimacy of the EZLN's demands, violence and repression continue in Chiapas. However, even without losing oneself to idealism, by the EZLN continuing to appeal to a twenty-first century humanitarian cosmopolitanism, international awareness and activism may yet be able to improve the situation in Chiapas.

***Stephanie Mooney** was a student at the University of British Columbia at the time of the original publication. The 2005 edition of *the Atlas* was a joint venture by UBC and SFU undergraduates; for more detail, please see the Chairman and Editor's Notes.

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