

PART I

The Political and Historical Contexts of Zapatismo



Introduction

The “Fields” of Anthropology, Human Rights, and Contemporary Zapatismo

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to introduce relevant background information, and, more important, to locate myself within the context of my research in terms of my position in the international political economy, my relationship to those I work with, and my ethical responsibilities as an anthropologist—in other words, what is my role in the stories told in this book, and how and why did I take on the research questions I did? In addition, I argue in this chapter for a flexible understanding of anthropology, one that includes using the tools of anthropology to function as a witness and human rights observer, and communicating what we see as anthropologists in a variety of forums. I make this argument in dialogue with many others who have examined these questions.

NAFTA AND ERASING ZAPATA’S LEGACY

Without a doubt, the most enduring legacy of the Mexican Revolution was the agrarian reform constituted under Article 27 of the Constitution that allowed for the formation of ejidos as collective entities with legal stature, specific territorial limits, and representative bodies of governance. Rights to ejido land most often went to men who petitioned or who inherited such rights; they then became ejidatarios, with voting rights in the ejido governance body.

Women’s access to land rights was limited in Mexican agrarian law, primarily through their exclusion from being “heads of households” un-

less they were widows or single mothers. Helga Baitenmann has written (1997; 2000) the most detailed analysis of gender and agrarian rights in twentieth-century Mexico. As she documents, women and men did not become equal under the law until 1971 with regard to their ability to qualify for ejidal rights. The 1971 Federal Law of Agrarian Reform, Article 200, states that to receive land rights, people must simply be “Mexican by birth, male or female, older than sixteen or of any age if they are supporting a family” (Botey Estapé 1991, iii); under this law, women were no longer required to be mothers or widows maintaining a family to qualify for land rights. The law also allowed women to hold any position of authority (*cargo*) within ejidos, and called for the creation of Agro-Industrial Units for Women (UAIMS). These units allowed groups of women collectively to hold use rights to ejido parcels equivalent to those of one ejidatario.

But, a decade after women were finally granted equality with men under the law to receive land rights, the government began a process that ultimately resulted in the dismantling of the right to petition for land, and that aimed to promote privatization of land and of many other resources.

A series of 1980s measures aimed at privatization of government enterprises, a loosening of federal regulations to permit and encourage foreign investment and ownership, and the individualization of property and social relations between the state and its citizens found their logical conclusions in the 1990s reforms to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution and in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). As viewed from Mexico, the purpose of NAFTA was to facilitate the entrance of U.S. capital into the Mexican economy. This was achieved through the privatization of national industry—airlines, telephones, mining, railroads, banks—and the lowering of trade barriers to allow U.S. companies into all economic sectors. Further, to allow U.S. products to compete in the Mexican market, Mexico eliminated price supports and subsidies to basic food items; this resulted in a decrease in the value of real wages, as people had to pay more for basic goods while their wages remained unchanged. Overall, NAFTA led to the acceleration of corporate-led economic integration between Mexico and the United States, benefiting a few but not most.

What were the results of NAFTA in Mexico? After the first few years, it became evident that public policy in Mexico focused much more on the needs of foreign capital and foreign markets than on domestic producers and consumers. During the first two years of NAFTA, it is estimated, more than two million jobs were lost as the country’s productive appa-

ratus more or less collapsed (Heredia 1996, 34). Small and medium-size businesses could not compete with foreign corporations, and local and regional businesses were being replaced by large U.S. firms such as Wal-Mart. Domestic consumer debt increased dramatically. The big winners after NAFTA were the owners of newly privatized companies. Privatization of national businesses led to massive profits for a small number of people. In 1995, “the combined wealth of Mexico’s fifteen richest individuals was 25.6 billion dollars” (ibid., 35). Most of Mexico’s population had to survive with very low wages and no social services. Two-thirds of the economically active population (25 million of 36 million workers) in 1996 survived on informal activities without access to social security, medical care, or insurance (ibid.). While some predicted that, with NAFTA, wages in the United States and Mexico would grow closer, this has not proven true; the minimum wage in most parts of the United States is twelve times higher than in Mexico. In late 1996, the U.S. minimum wage was at least \$4.75 per hour, versus \$0.41 in Mexico. In the Mexican countryside, wages were even less, often about \$3.00 per day—the legal rural minimum wage, but in Chiapas and elsewhere only about half of the rural workforce receive the minimum wage. The rest get between \$1.50 and \$3.00 a day. Between 1994 and 1999, the minimum wage in Mexico lost between 22 percent and 24 percent of its purchasing power (González 1999).

Social polarization has become a trademark of contemporary Mexico. By mid 1998, although the average per capita monthly income was \$75.00, in rural communities, it barely reached \$37.00; in more marginal and indigenous areas, it was \$18.00 (Cevallos 1998). In 1998, more than half of Mexico—50 million people—still lived in poverty, with incomes of about U.S.\$3.00 per day. The 24 million people residing in rural Mexico in 1998 represented about 25 percent of the population, but two-thirds of those in extreme poverty (Gunson 1998). Those living in extreme poverty were often surviving on the equivalent of \$2 per day or less.

NAFTA had a major impact on Mexico’s rural population. It opened Mexico’s grain market to U.S. exports in exchange for opening U.S. fruit and vegetable markets to Mexican exports. People in the United States can now buy more Mexican avocados at lower prices, while cheap U.S. corn is available to Mexican consumers. To facilitate competition from Mexican crops, the Mexican government eliminated price supports on most grains. This action had a strong impact on small farmers who sold corn on the domestic market and benefited from guaranteed prices more

than double the international market price. As support prices were eliminated, farmers dropped out of the market and tried to find other ways to make a living.

One key aspect of preparing for NAFTA was announced by the Mexican government in late 1991 and implemented in 1992. At that time, reforms made to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution eliminated the government's obligation to redistribute land, and made it possible for collectively held land to be privatized. For those still hoping to solicit the government for ejido land, it was too late; the door had shut. For those interested in gaining access to some of the most productive pieces of collectively held land in prime agricultural, urban, and tourist locations, the door was opened. The piece of real estate at stake was equal to about 50 percent of Mexico's national territory.

A new bureaucracy was set up to carry out the reforms, the Agrarian Attorney General's Office, or Procuraduría Agraria. An army of new employees set out to Mexico's ejidos to offer information and—if ejidos agreed—to help them join a program to measure and map boundaries between communities and between individual plots. After all disputes were resolved (*if* they were resolved, often a major question), people in ejidos received certificates designating their rights to the land and outlining the precise location and measurements of their plots. The certificates could serve as a basis for conversion to a land title, if the individual so desired and if a majority of ejido members voted in favor of the individual receiving a title so as to sell his or her land. The process served to measure and codify as many plots of land as possible in relation to the individuals who worked them, in preparation for privatization. It also mapped those other lands held as collective resources, such as forests, pastures, and watersheds.

While many who watched this process pronounced it the final nail in the coffin of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, what I came to understand was that the process revealed new revolutions burning in the hearts and minds of rural Mexicans and, probably, many others; numerous responses to the end of agrarian reform and to the increasing social and economic stratification associated with NAFTA were bubbling beneath the surface of Mexican society. These revolutions had long and complex histories; many were silent and unseen. Silence that had been interpreted as agreement or indifference masked a different reality.

These other revolutions—perhaps ultimately to be seen as the revolutions of the twenty-first century—are tied to the 1910 revolution and its use as a framework for promoting nationalism in Mexico during the

twentieth century. They are also, however, regionally based in their deployment of local histories to make the Mexican Revolution and nation belong to everyone, although in different ways in different communities.

During the summer of 1993, I worked in Oaxaca, my eighteen-month-old son in tow. I spent much time going to meetings called by the Agrarian Attorney General's Office, in which well-meaning staff explained to ejidatarios how the new program to measure land and provide certificates of land rights would benefit them by guaranteeing the security of their land. What unfolded in these initial meetings revealed in great detail the historical visions, divisions, and claims that ejidatarios had about their communities, themselves, and their relation to Mexican history, particularly to the Mexican Revolution. After attending more than a dozen such meetings, and settling into three communities where I followed the interactions between ejidatario men and women and agrarian officials from the Agrarian Attorney General's Office, I soon sensed that the process unfolding concerned much more than bureaucratic details. The act of mapping and measuring land brought up every kind of historical land dispute, pushed people to examine their historical relationship with the government, and highlighted the contradictions of government agrarian policies through time.

THE "FIELDS" OF U.S.-MEXICAN POLITICAL RELATIONS

During this initial fieldwork, an elderly friend named José Martínez, an original ejidatario of Santa María del Tule, provided me with a historical map for understanding the end of agrarian reform. He also clarified beyond a doubt that he, and many like him, understood what was happening in the neoliberal restructuring of Mexico about to be formalized through the initiation of NAFTA that 1 January 1994. I spoke often with José that summer when I visited the ejido. Our mutual interest in the history of the ejido of Santa María del Tule brought us together, and he was extremely supportive of my efforts to conduct oral histories and talk with people about their feelings concerning the agrarian reform and other topics.

In addition, his responses to my questions reconstituted our relationship and "the field" of our interaction. While anthropologists often assume that "being in the field" refers to taking themselves somewhere else, José had a different idea. By first positioning himself locally and then bringing in his view of the Mexican government, the U.S. government, people in the United States, and the imperialism of U.S. territorial

expansion, he bound us into one set of historical, political, and economic relationships; I was in his “field,” he in my “field.” Being “in the field” thus was an ongoing, constant process and place, from which I could not remove myself or come and go at will. Both of us were always “in the field.” Whether talking together in Oaxaca or occupying the separate places we called “home” (Boston for me at the time, Oaxaca for him), we were appropriately constructed by him as part of the same larger system and set of relationships. His lesson to me was that I could not come and go from his community and consider that I had left the “field.” Because of who I am, where I come from, and the nature of my inquiry, I would always be “in the field.” Consider his responses to my questions about changes to agrarian reform laws.

LYNN: What do you think will happen with the new agrarian reform law? Will it change things? What will happen?

JOSÉ: All the land that is now part of the ejido used to be private property. Before, people in El Tule were really poor. All they could do was to sell their labor. They also sold their land if they had any. If someone was sick and they died, where were the poor people going to go to get money to bury them? They would go to the rich and borrow money from them. Then the rich would buy their land. In [the neighboring town of] Lachigolo, they lost all of their land. Here, too. Then they passed a law to take away all of the land from the hacienda [large landed estate or sizeable property of privately titled land]. We got our ejido. Now they still want to take it away. Even after we got the land, the hacendados [owners of large, landed private estates] still tried to take it away. We would find them with their oxen working on our ejido land. We had to run them off the land. We suffered a lot getting rid of these people. The people from the hacienda had the federal forces on their side. Zapata was the one who helped the poor. He had to force the hacendados out. All of the poor were on the side of Zapata. The hacendados were with the rich. They killed a lot of poor people to hang onto their land. . . .

Now [in 1993] the government of the United States is probably speaking with the Mexican government. That’s what they say. . . . The government of the United States wants to expand its territory. The United States has a lot of people and it needs more land. They are going to come here from the United States to buy our land. And who isn’t going to sell to them? If they pay a high enough price, then people will sell. Little by little, they will buy up the ejido, just like the hacendados did before. That is what is going to happen.

By the end of his response, José has wrapped us both in the larger political economy of the United States and Mexico. His reframing of the discussion was the beginning of a five-year journey that made me con-

clude that “the field” is unbounded and I/we are always in it (see Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Anthropologists do not go to work in an objectively bounded place. Rather, we construct research “fields” that fit with our personal agendas and ideologies. We are the creators of “fields” as well as of what we call “field” work. Such creations are built on the assumption that anthropologists are powerful, determining actors, who can impose boundaries around peoples and places, and that we can pop ourselves in and out of those imposed boundaries at will. We usually become conscious of the bounded “fields” we have created when we engage in certain acts of thinking, analyzing, and writing. If, however, we imagine ourselves in permanent, ongoing relationships with those people we study and work with, “the field” disappears and becomes a part of larger global relations that we do not create but simply live in, like everyone else.

REWRITING OUR HANDBOOKS TO FIELDWORK

My prior experience living and working in a nearby Zapotec community, Teotitlán del Valle (Stephen 1991), as well as my ability to still speak some Zapotec, was of interest to many elderly ejidatarios in Santa María del Tule. After I presented myself to the ejido authorities, provided them with a copy of my first book about Teotitlán, and gave them letters of presentation from a research institute and university in Oaxaca, as well as a Spanish translation of my proposal, they told me that *they* could not decide whether I could conduct my project on the history of the ejido and on reactions to the reforms to Article 27. The *comisariado ejidal* (ejidal commissioner) stated: “Here, we decide things in our assembly. The ejidatarios have to all hear your proposal and then vote on it. Come this Sunday afternoon and we will listen to your proposal and give you an answer.”

That Sunday, I returned and found people beginning to mill around outside the Casa Ejidal (the meeting hall and office of the ejido authorities). I noticed that many were elderly and that there was a strong contingent of women. I began to talk with a group of women, alternating between Zapotec and Spanish. It was at this meeting that I met José. He introduced me to several other original ejidatarios.

The meeting was long, with fascinating details. Much time was spent discussing the new program for measuring land, the PROCEDE (Program for the Certification of Ejido Land Rights and the Titling of Urban House Plots, which I discuss in the next chapter). Many voiced concern

about whether or not people would sell land. Opinions were expressed about the impending beginning of NAFTA as well. Toward the end, I was invited to present my project. I spoke about my experience in Teotitlán, about how I would go about writing a history and talking with people. I emphasized the importance of respect, of only talking with those who were interested, and my willingness to write a document, in Spanish, for the community that would take into consideration whatever items the community might want to include. After I presented my proposal, there was a discussion period in which people engaged in small conversations with those around them. Then a more formal exchange ensued. People raised their hands and asked questions. "Who pays you?" asked an elderly woman. "Where did you get the money to come to Oaxaca?" asked a man in his forties, knitting his brow together. "How much does it cost to fly to Boston?" asked another. "What will happen to the history you collect?" inquired an elderly man, a member of the ejido vigilance committee. "Will you make copies for people here?" I answered these questions as best I could. "I received a grant from a research center at the University of California in San Diego that is looking at whether or not changes to the agrarian reform law and PROCEDURE program will help or hurt people in Mexico." "It costs about six hundred American dollars to fly round-trip from Boston." "The history I collect will first be turned over to the community, the ejido committee, and then be used in a book. I will bring a copy of that book here and do my very best to have it published in Spanish. I will also provide a Spanish version of ejido history to anyone interested. That will be my first priority."

After this, the comisariado asked for a vote of those in favor of permitting me to work in the ejido. I held my breath and sighed in relief when most raised their hands. I was delighted that the ejidatarios of Santa María had agreed to work with me. I was equally delighted to see a political process where strong debate and discussion was encouraged and where community members carefully considered who could come to conduct research; the ejidatarios were thinking about what the community would risk and gain from the presence of a researcher.

The process that took place in Santa María del Tule was more or less repeated in the other communities I worked in. Approval required I present myself in the ejido assemblies and, if I wanted to work with a subgroup of the ejido, such as a women's group, I also met with them and discussed their interests as well as my ideas.

My experience in Santa María del Tule and elsewhere led me to reflect on my anthropological training for fieldwork, which had emphasized:

- writing a proposal with a hypothesis for which one will seek funding and then “prove” in the field
- making initial contacts in a community
- gaining formal approval from community authorities
- cultivating key informants
- taking care to be neutral and objective, trying to avoid participation in community divisions
- keeping a safe distance between one’s emotional life and life in “the field”
- conceiving “the field” as something one goes “into” and “out” of, a clearly defined space detached from one’s person
- engaging in participant observation
- doing interviews
- surveying
- taking detailed daily fieldnotes

I found myself wishing that the ejidatarios of Santa María del Tule could provide a new field guide for anthropologists to prepare them with an entirely new set of priorities. Key parts would include:

- writing a proposal in the local language and being prepared to change it substantially in response to the needs of those one works with
- presenting oneself and one’s proposal to the community, answering questions, and being prepared to submit to collective opinion the issues of whether and how one may proceed
- holding conversations with only those people willing and interested in one’s research and only when convenient for them
- understanding that observing is a participatory and political act, and being prepared to justify how and why information collected is used and who has rights to it
- understanding that neutrality is not possible and that every person, including an outsider, who participates in community life is a political actor
- knowing one cannot expect others to share life histories, thoughts, hopes, opinions, and observations without being ready to do the same
- understanding that personal priorities and interpretations will neces-

sarily influence the words and ideas of anthropologists as well as of those whom anthropologists have traditionally labeled “informants”

- being prepared to have one’s first research product be that which the people one works with request

Such suggestions are not new. Indigenous peoples of the Americas have been challenging North American and European anthropologists about the politics of their research for quite some time now. Emblematic of this critique are four ethical failures pointed out by Luis Enrique Sam Colop, a Mayan intellectual, in a 1990 newsletter. They include “foreign scholars who do not consult with the community where they are going to work about their project” and who “rarely present a final report of the study to the community”; large bodies of knowledge compiled by foreigners not made available to Mayan communities, leaving them “ignorant of what foreign scholars have said about their language, culture, or community”; foreigners who hide “religious or proselytizing agendas behind their academic status” and may interfere in community decision-making; researchers whose chief concern is with fulfilling academic aspirations and who “take the service of the community for granted” (Sam Colop 1990, as cited in Warren 1998, 82). The publication of such a critique and ongoing exchanges between indigenous and North American researchers are part of a move to create engaged anthropology.

This exchange between indigenous activists and scholars and nonindigenous academics often involves a tension between the essentialist constructions of ethnicity used to build movements and tribal legitimacy, and the constructivist perspectives on ethnicity predominant in contemporary cultural anthropology. Kay Warren describes the tensions of this dialogue with Mayan intellectuals (1998, 69–85), as does Les Field in his collaborations with “unacknowledged tribes” of California (Field 1999b). In his frank discussion of the need to sometimes strategically deploy essentialism, as well as in his search to bridge the work of activist anthropologists and indigenous intellectuals, Field brings forward important issues that are not easily resolved. An example is the tension between deconstructivist anthropologists and indigenous intellectuals deploying essentialist constructions of identity for political purposes. Anthropologists working in Latin America with indigenous intellectuals and activists have dealt with an ongoing questioning of the anthropological model (see Jackson 1989, 1991; Rappaport 1998; Ramos 1998, 1999–2000). Thus I see my work as part of ongoing collaborative ef-

forts that are reshaping the nature of anthropology through research that seeks to serve the communities it studies.

DECENTERING THE FIELD: THE FORCED DECONSTRUCTION OF BOUNDARIES

On 1 January 1994, just a little more than four months after I finished my summer fieldwork in Oaxaca, the Zapatista rebellion exploded in Chiapas. I was not surprised at the appearance of the Zapatistas; all summer long in Oaxaca, we had heard rumors about a possible guerrilla movement in the south. The national magazine *Proceso* had reported on a confrontation on 23–24 May 1993 between the Mexican Army and an armed group in the Lacandon jungle. Friends in the city of Oaxaca were discussing the article and other rumors. Some commented that there were guerrillas in Oaxaca and other places as well. José Martínez may not have been surprised by the Zapatista rebellion. I did not get a chance to talk to him about it before he died in the spring of 1994; I greatly missed him when I returned to continue work in Santa María del Tule in 1994.

Shortly after the Zapatistas made the international press by occupying five county seats in the state of Chiapas (see map 3) and gained immediate notoriety through Subcomandante Marcos's interviews and the first of many communiqués from the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, I began to receive calls—from the press, from friends, from students, from political connections. They all wanted to know, “What is going on in Chiapas?” “What is happening with the Indians of Mexico?” For the first time in my life, being an anthropologist who wrote about indigenous people in the south of Mexico made me interesting to a wide range of people. It turned out that in New England, there were not many people writing about Indians in Mexico. In February of 1994, I was asked to be part of a panel at Harvard University, a panel that subsequently traveled to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York—a high-powered forum and think tank for mainstream policy makers, financial brokers, politicians, and academics. The panel was titled “The Chiapas Rebellion and the Future of Mexico.” My conversations with José Martínez flashed through my mind—first, because he understood the stakes of the Agrarian Reform and NAFTA, and, second, because his reconstruction of our interaction into one integrated field of Mexican–U.S. political relations was staring me right in the face.

As I sat in a cab zooming through downtown Manhattan to the posh building housing the Council on Foreign Relations, I realized that who I was, what I know, whom I learned it from, whom I tell it to, and how I tell it is profoundly political. I was about to address, along with several others, some of the elite policy makers and power brokers who would actually influence U.S. policy toward Mexico—financial, military, and otherwise. José and I indeed were both in the same “field.”

On the panel, in front of bankers, development officers, and foreign investors, we talked about Chiapas from our varied viewpoints. In the sherry hour following the discussion, several people sought me out as an anthropologist and wanted to know “What do those Indians down there really want?” “Are they unhappy?” “What do they think about NAFTA?” “Could this rebellion really destabilize Mexico?” These questions were similar to those I had received from press persons who wanted to know not only about Chiapas but also about what was going on with other Indians—for instance, in neighboring Oaxaca.

For the first time in my professional career, being an anthropologist was suddenly a credential of interest to bankers. This gave me pause. In answering the questions of people at the Council on Foreign Relations, or those of journalists, I often repeated the words of José Martínez, stating that most indigenous people I knew in Mexico had clear and strong opinions about NAFTA, about U.S. foreign policy, and about their government’s economic policies. Many were concerned about losing their land and about whether all the economic changes would benefit them, and were suspicious of promises made by the Mexican government. They also had their own ideas for how to modify government policies; they were not mystified. The people at the sherry hour were polite, seemed quite interested, but remained puzzled about what the Indians might really want.

For me, an ethical corner in this research project had been turned. I realized, as during the Salvadoran civil war, that most people with real decision-making power have no solid information about the perspectives of those affected by U.S. policies and, even if they are given it, do not have the ability to assimilate it. If I had information and analysis about the situation in Mexico, offered by people usually far removed from the halls of economic and political power, I had a moral responsibility and commitment to impart that information and analysis to as broad an audience as possible with as much respect for those who offered the information as possible. Since the U.S.–Mexican political economy is integrated, then, as a U.S. citizen who is an anthropologist I am most

definitely a participant, a native in those relations. My invitation to the Council on Foreign Relations clearly demonstrated that. Thus, another important process had broadened “the field” where I was operating as an anthropologist.

In response to conversations in early 1994 with an old friend in Mexico City, a warrior in the human rights movement, six of us—both Mexican and American—formed an organization in Boston called *Tonanztin: The Boston Committee in Support of Native Peoples of Mexico*. We put together information packets and were able to draw large gatherings, mostly of representatives of the Latino media and a wide range of Latino social movements and grassroots organizations, to informational meetings and a press conference. Of particular note was the interest of Native American groups. Mexicans in the group were concerned also to reach out to the small Mexican community in Boston. We had the first of many meetings with the staff of the Mexican Consulate and became a regular presence in Boston, putting on educational events, organizing humanitarian aid campaigns, participating in human rights delegations, and connecting the situation in Mexico to U.S. foreign policy and local concerns. (The group was still going strong in 1999, after I had moved to Oregon.)

It is this work over time that lent me credibility in Chiapas and provided entrée to certain communities: Guadalupe Tepeyac in 1994, La Realidad in 1995, 1996, and 1997, Ejido Morelia in 1995, San Andrés Larráinzar and Oventic in 1996 and 1997, Acteal in 1998 and 2000, and Ocosingo, Chenalhó, and Polhó in 2000. Old friendships from the 1980s, when I lived in Mexico and knew a range of people working in peasant and indigenous organizations and in the beginnings of the human rights movement, were also key in providing a perspective and in helping me gain access to participate in forums and meetings organized by the EZLN. I brought the skills of anthropology to human rights and humanitarian aid work, and used my experiences while engaged in such work to write anthropologically.

WHEN REBELLION TURNS TO LOW-INTENSITY WAR

During the summer of 1994, I spent two months in Oaxaca with the specific intention of monitoring receptions to the government’s land-measuring and certification program (PROCEDE), observing national presidential elections and responses to them, and seeing what people thought about the Zapatista rebellion—if anything. I was particularly