

El Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional: The Use of Identity in the Path to Legitimization and Non-Violence

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This article attempts to describe the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional's trend towards nonviolence. There has been a simultaneous shift away from armed conflict due to various external influences, as well as a conscious internal push for a nonviolent image. This piece looks at the evolution of the organization and explains what internal and external effects impacted the EZLN to be the movement it is today.

Since the mid-1990's, throughout Mexico and much of the world, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) has captured headlines due to their continuing fight for indigenous rights, and because of the methods they have used to try to achieve their demands. Their methods, especially the use of violence, have been a source of extreme controversy in Mexico and, increasingly, among Mexico's indigenous populations, other oppressed Latin American groups, NGOs, and anti-neo-liberalists. As can be seen in these groups and others, the controversy has become more globalized since the Zapatistas have become a globally recognized movement due to their use of identity. In the past sixteen years, the EZLN has successfully used identity to legitimize its struggle and to become a more peaceful movement. As a result, Subcomandante Marcos's image has transformed from that of a modern Che Guevara to a modern Martin Luther King, Jr.

Although the Zapatistas had been organized far before the 1990s, they went public with their struggle during this decade, and eventually, the rebellion became violent. On January 1st, 1994, thousands of indigenous—and a few non-indigenous—people rose up in arms in Chiapas, capturing several towns and setting fire to police buildings and military barracks. Chanting, “*Ya basta!*” to the rhythm of a several hundred-year-

long repression, Southern Mexico's indigenous people had finally had enough. Shortly thereafter, the Mexican army retaliated in an attempt to quell the rebellion. The federal retaliation was successful in silencing the January uprising and driving the Zapatistas back into the jungle; however, it was not successful in stamping out the movement, its ideology, and its goals. Both sides acted violently in 1994, and both sides inflicted casualties. The events that took place during this uprising captured the attention of the world. The Zapatistas knew that all eyes were on them, but the attention itself did not help their cause.¹ What they needed was support. In an effort to gain support, the Zapatistas would become visibly political in the following years, and would eventually set in motion a change in their methods. This included the aspects of their movement that they themselves emphasized, including representation and identity.

In 1995, the EZLN moved away from guerrilla tactics and started becoming more political. In August of this year, they held their first *consulta*, which was nonviolent, and in which they called specifically for public opinion on how to handle the problems they were facing. This was a drastic step toward peaceful conflict resolution. In 1996, they took another step in that direction by participating

¹ Bob, Clifford. *The Marketing of Rebellion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 4.

in the San Andrés Accords and holding the First International *Encuentro* for Humanity and Against Neo-liberalism, which demonstrated a willingness to speak diplomatically and make concessions with the federal government- a stark contrast to just two years before, when the EZLN and the Mexican government were opening fire on each other in civilian territory. The International *Encuentro* for Humanity and Against Neo-liberalism displayed an undeniable politicization of the Zapatista movement. Neo-liberalism is a political ideology, and their claim that it was “for humanity” implies a political humanitarian purpose as a result of the government not looking out for its own people. Through the events and the steps they took in 1995 and 1996, the Zapatistas were conveying a clear message that they demanded to be taken as a political force—as more than an armed group of individuals with a list of qualms. Thus, by 1996, the EZLN was more than a guerrilla force.²

The initially violent nature of the EZLN in 1994 is attributed to the combination of the people’s unrest and anger towards the government, as well as to certain national and international conditions that helped to radicalize the Zapatistas. The economic crisis during this time, though not as bad as that of the 1980s, was enough to cause widespread discontent and unrest, and was exacerbated once again by the drop in oil prices. Due to Mexico’s debt and its history of defaulting on payments, the international community urged Mexico to cut wages, devalue the peso, and remove urban and rural subsidies.³ The economic state that Mexico found itself in during this time did not benefit the country’s poor community. The indigenous people thought that Mexico’s weak economy indicated that the government would welcome more foreign investment. This might entail selling land that was supposed to be protected under *ejido* contracts, upon which indigenous people lived, as had happened in the past, during the *Porfiriato*.⁴ The weak economy also meant less social spending on health, welfare, or education programs for the poor. The international pressure

on Mexico to cut wages meant a reduction in the quality of life for poor agriculture workers who could already barely make ends meet, and the removal of subsidies meant their increased vulnerability to agricultural workers in other countries who were supported through subsidies. This was exacerbated by the introduction of NAFTA. The flow of American imports included United States crops produced by subsidized American farmers with whom the Mexican farmers were unable to compete, thereby suffering large losses. The externally imposed devaluation of the peso perpetuated a cycle of Mexican economic inferiority. Producers were not well compensated for their exports, and it would be more difficult for Mexico to pay off its debt. These conditions further inflamed tensions with rebel groups in Chiapas. They began to see their time as running out and violence as their means of gaining the government’s attention. Violence was initially used at the beginning of the rebellion in order to achieve a reaction, not in an effort to take over state power. This is one reason why after 1994, the Zapatistas began to decrease their use of violence.⁵ After the initial rebellion, the Zapatistas’ ideology began to take a different shape and with that, so did their methods.

The violence at the start of the revolution can also be attributed to the influence of violence in surrounding Latin American countries. For several years, Guatemala had been experiencing its own conflict. During this time, many Guatemalans migrated to Mexico, bringing Marxist rhetoric and guerrilla tactics. Early on in the movement, many Zapatista revolutionaries were identified as having Guatemalan accents, indicating that they had a part in creating the rebellion in Chiapas.⁶ As the EZLN aged, two things happened: the Soviet Union finished disintegrating and the Sandinista government fell. The international community was experiencing a shift towards democracy, so the Zapatistas’ decrease in violence can be interpreted as a reflection of the change in the international mindset, and an “opportunistic reaction” to the changing trend.⁷

² Hayden, Tom. *The Zapatista Reader*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002, 12.

³ Collier, George. *Basta!: Land and the Zapatista Rebellion In Chiapas*. 3rd ed. Oakland: Food First Books, 1994, 83, 84.

⁴ Gibler, John. *Mexico Unconquered: Chronicles of Power and Revolt*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009, 70.

⁵ Harvey, Neil. *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*. Duke

⁶ Hayden, 81.

⁷ Harvey, 9.

However, the decrease in violence in the EZLN is mostly due to their need for economic support. The Zapatista movement, like most institutions or political entities, has an agenda and needs funds in order to pursue that agenda. As the 20th Century came to a close, the phenomenon of the NGO was becoming increasingly popular and the Zapatistas saw opportunities that might open up for them if they acquired the economic backing of such organizations. The support of the NGOs could help to pay for meetings, transportation, fundraisers, and living expenses; which would allow the Zapatistas to focus on achieving their political goals. Without economic support, they would be less able to invest time, money, or effort into the EZLN's political agenda. In some ways, economic power was more important than the contents of the message of a social movement, and the success of a movement may be determined solely by its access to cash.⁸ The NGOs provided the “political purchase of democracy,”—or their access or ability to having legislation passed, etc.—so their support was vital to the existence of Zapatista movement.⁹

Furthermore, without the approval and backing of the non-governmental organizations, the EZLN could possibly lose the worldwide attention that it had garnered. . With the innumerable coalitions, unions, rebellions, and others that seem to appear in new places around the world every day, there is an enormous amount of competition between them to receive political and financial NGO support.¹⁰ This NGO support has the power to determine the relative success of a given movement. In the mid-1990s, the Soviet bloc was crumbling, there was a turn in democratization, and guerrilla warfare seemed increasingly outdated—NGOs were on the lookout for a new kind of movement.¹¹ In order to be a successful rebellion, the Zapatistas began emphasizing their desire for nonviolence since this is a concept that NGOs consistently promote. However, they also began to emphasize the issue of identity to use as a catalyst to achieving support.¹²

⁸ Harvey, 87.

⁹ Harvey, 9.

¹⁰ Bob, 4.

¹¹ Harvey, 15.

¹² Bob, 5.

At this time, scholars were fiercely debating what “identity” was, and ordinary people were challenging the labels they had been branded with by the elites, by their peers, and by their friends and family. Auto-identification was a novelty for some, and was increasingly more important to the individual in maintaining a level of power over his or her life since it gave the individual a sense of self-awareness about his or her past, present, and future. A common identity also brings groups of people together with a uniting bond, and especially in the case of the Zapatistas, a strong sense of self-identity may even prevent further colonization or repression because, “*el pueblo unido jamás será vencido*.” The common identity represented by the Zapatistas has ties to Chiapas. Of the three million people living in Chiapas, where the EZLN is based, over one quarter of those people identify as belonging to an indigenous group.¹³ As the majority of the Zapatista army is composed of Mayan people, the Zapatistas represent the conflict that has been present in Chiapas for hundreds of years. Many of the claims of the rebels rest on appeals to indigenous rights and autonomy, indigenous individuals and groups in the state and country therefore identify closely with the movement and feel represented by Subcomandante Marcos and the rest of the EZLN.¹⁴ However, the EZLN came to represent increasingly larger groups.

Much of their fight against the federal government is based on a history that people throughout Latin America have experienced, as well on problems that take root in that history and still ravage the indigenous populations today. The repression that the indigenous currently experience is a result of the Spanish conquest and the history of violence that the Europeans imposed on them, including using them as pawns in political battles between liberals and conservatives in the 19th Century, and establishing the *patron* system.¹⁵ For example, the Zapatistas have demands that apply to other repressed sects of Mexican society—or capitalist society, in general. They are calling for a new constitution to replace that of 1917, since they claim the current constitution was never implemented the way it should have been, and

¹³ Harvey, 70.

¹⁴ Collier, 23.

¹⁵ Collier, 26, 27.

never protected its citizens the way a constitution should.¹⁶

This claim represents Mexico's poor, repressed, and any citizen who agrees that the government must replace the constitution and abide by it. The Zapatistas are also calling for a struggle against neo-liberalism and the hardships it brings upon agricultural workers and other poor classes. These claims are not particular to the indigenous of Southern Mexico. They can—and do—apply to people all over the world and the struggles that they face. This way, the EZLN represents other minorities that also face repression throughout Mexico, such as the Jewish population, as well as to other minority groups outside of Mexico. As a result, the Zapatistas identify with other groups and populations that exist under similarly repressive historical circumstances in Central American, South American and the Caribbean.

Their broader and greater use of identity has meant more people supporting their struggle. The use of identity during this stage in the Zapatista movement coincided with a particular moment in history: after the American civil rights movement; the toppling of torturous repressive governments in Latin America and Eurasia; the five hundredth year anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival to the Western Hemisphere; the change in the education system; and the rise of NGOs. These have all led to an increasing awareness of our common human identity and this, in turn, has led to a decrease in racism. The decrease in racism—specifically in this case towards indigenous people—has meant more sympathy for the Zapatistas' struggle and more people rallying behind their cause. This is beneficial to the EZLN and because as its following grows, so does its potential for power. Its increasing size helps persuade civilians of surrounding towns that the Zapatistas have the necessary force to fight for their rights and against the repression that they, too, wish would cease. The growing numbers also demand the attention of the Mexican government, demonstrating to federal officials that, despite the government's attempts to quell the insurrection years before, the movement is still strong, and that the people and their demands are to be taken

¹⁶ Collier, 28.

seriously. The Zapatistas took an active role in increasing the size of the EZLN. Subcomandante Marcos illustrated the open door policy of the EZLN, its acceptance, and its efforts to grow when he welcomed “‘zedillo-phobics, all global-phobics, even all phobic-phobics’ to join the struggle against neo-liberalism.”¹⁷ In this way of opening the movement to people who identified as being social or political minorities or misfits, the EZLN used the concept of identity and wider acceptance to attract more people to their movement, thus gaining more power.

Not only has the Zapatista movement become a mode of identification for entire social sects, such as the indigenous or other poor communities, the EZLN also seeks to represent the individual and his or her struggle. The way in which this is most commonly experienced is through the image of Subcomandante Marcos. His mask has been described as a mirror because people feel as though they see themselves, their ideals, and their personal struggles reflected in him.¹⁸ To demonstrate to the government and to the nation the impact that Marcos and the movement has had on not only the indigenous population, the country, and the world, but also on the individual, hundreds of people marched through Mexico City's Zócalo, declaring, “*Todos somos Marcos.*”¹⁹ Clearly, the cultural and social identity that people felt in relation to the Zapatistas and the representation they believed they achieved through the EZLN was immense. However, the Zapatistas also represent people with a particular political identity.

On one hand, the world is becoming increasingly globalized, capitalistic, and neoliberal. On the other hand, there has been a tremendous backlash to this type of politics, consisting of a demand for nonviolent conflict resolution, and the concern for, and preservation of, culture. There is an undeniable rise in a new way of thinking about power and resistance, and many of these new thinkers are identifying and siding with the Zapatistas.²⁰

¹⁷ Hayden, 95, 96.

¹⁸ Klein, Naomi. *The Zapatista Reader*. “The Unknown Icon.” New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002. (2001) 116.

¹⁹ Harvey, 10.

²⁰ Klein, 118.

This tension has caused the rise of a new kind of cosmopolitanism, which reinforces the similarities all human being share. New cosmopolitanism breaks down racial identities, and builds up a humanitarian identity and a mindset based on solidarity and our common humanity. It is precisely this type of identity that differentiates the current and future EZLN from that of the past. Initially, the Zapatistas' foundation was based on issues mainly affecting the indigenous, but today, their struggle is much more encompassing and has a global resonance, global following, and most importantly, global identity.

The Zapatista identity has had much to do with their movement towards nonviolence because of the movement's history and the Mayan traditional culture. There has been land conflict in Chiapas for decades between the *ladinos* and indigenous populations. For generations, these conflicts have been resolved using citizenship and identity, so the indigenous populations of Chiapas have traditionally used identity as a central concept to conflict resolution.²¹ Throughout this history, the indigenous people were—and still are—wary of guerrilla tactics.²² It was Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, a former college professor from northern Mexico of predominantly European ancestry—now known as Subcomandante Marcos—who first introduced Marxist rhetoric, guerrilla mentality and, most importantly, stockpiles of technologically advanced weaponry to the indigenous people of Chiapas. As the movement moved forward, Subcomandante Marcos and his fellow revolutionaries with whom he had arrived in jungle adapted themselves to more peaceful Mayan ways of life and conflict resolution. This adaptation on behalf of Subcomandante Marcos and other strategists also helped propel the movement forward in a modern way. Marcos was adapting to the indigenous' way of life, which could have been his predecessors' downfall. Those who came before him, such as Che Guevara, may have been partially unsuccessful particularly because they failed to adapt to the lifestyles led by the people they were leading through revolution.²³ Marcos's adoption of the Mayans' ways of life meant a decrease in

violence and guerrilla tactics. Consequently, this led to legitimacy on a global scale, more economic support, and therefore, the opportunity to rebel in nonviolent ways.

There were motivations for the Zapatistas to make an initial shift towards nonviolence, but there were also many self-perpetuating results of decreasing violence that further continued this trend. As the EZLN began to take on the role of a political force by participating in meetings and *consultas*—and this gained increased domestic and international support—the Zapatistas, as a reformed guerilla force, were on a more level playing field with the federal government as a result of organized meetings and discussions, the people's believed power and legitimacy of the EZLN, and its increasing economic support. The belief that the Zapatistas were an almost equal combatant to the corrupt Mexican government gave more people hope in the final success of the Zapatistas. Its increasing size and power led people to believe that the EZLN was capable of making a real change, thus causing it to grow even more. This increase in size and power opened up new possibilities for negotiation between the EZLN and the federal government. As the movement grew, attention from the government increased, and so did possibilities for nonviolent conflict resolution through contracts, and talks. Even if the government did follow through with the agreements reached through these negotiations—such as in the San Andrés Accords—violence on behalf of the Zapatistas was no longer justified since it seemed to the people that the EZLN had increasing chances of solving their issues nonviolently.²⁴ As a result, the initial emphasis on identity, expansion in their representation, and shift towards nonviolence caused an increase in support for the movement, the growth of the movement gave it more power and status, and this new power and status made the use of violence unjustified.

Another self-perpetuating result of the decrease of violence was the Zapatistas' credibility. As one source recounts, “[In 1994], Zapatista-mania looked suspiciously like just another cause for guilty lefties...another Marxist rebel army, another macho

²¹ Harvey, 37.

²² Hayden, 97.

²³ Hayden, 98.

²⁴ Harvey, 9.

leader.”²⁵ However, by 1996, it was clear that the EZLN was more than this. Their emphasis on identity, their global resonance, their shift towards nonviolence, their support from NGOs, and their abnormally high amount of leverage for a rebel army against the Mexican government were also gathering more of a domestic and international audience, as well as more support. Not many people, including the Zapatistas themselves, had anticipated the success of the Zapatistas.²⁶ However, their successes gained them more popularity from the people and, as NGOs, leaders, and institutions witnessed the increasing status and credibility, it also gained them more economic support.

Throughout the development of the Zapatista movement, Subcomandante Marcos’s individual identity and image also changed in multiple ways. His changing identity affected the movement itself, such as his realization of the paradox of the military man in which he states that, “the military man is an absurdity because he must always rely on weapons to be able to convince them.”²⁷ This paradox provides insight into another possible cause for the demilitarization of the EZLN. The realization could be due to his changed state of mind after the initial uprising. Marcos had expected to die that day, so his survival, along with the attention of the federal, domestic, and international community motivated him to rethink the EZLN’s violent methods.²⁸ However, the EZLN also changed Marcos’s image. At inception, the Zapatistas were violent and armed with weapons and Marxist ideals. Their issues were particular to Latin America, and especially the poor and agriculturalist groups. This earned him the image of a modern Che Guevara since it followed the same trend as Che and his rebel groups approximately half a century before. However, the EZLN’s increasing emphasis on the issue of identity, its increased representation of people and social groups, and its shift towards nonviolence places Subcomandante Marcos in the position of

transition into a Martin Luther King, Jr. paradigm²⁹ While it is not accurate to compare the two figures directly, since Subcomandante Marcos is still a military man, Marcos’s aim for nonviolent conflict resolution, his heavy political involvement—as opposed to merely waging guerrilla warfare—and the global resonance of the issues for which the Zapatistas fight, make his current image resemble a modern Martin Luther King, as opposed to a modern Che.

The Zapatistas and their movement have come a long way from the armed uprising of 1994. Their following, setting, audience, and issues have all become global. In a world that increasingly places emphasis on capitalism, open markets, and individualism, it is imperative to preserve the cultures and rights of those whose lifestyles do not emphasize the importance of power and material wealth. Lust for money is never as apparent as when it conflicts with basic human rights. The Zapatistas and their demands are a struggle against a history of repression and the repercussions of imperialism and of the *conquista*. It is time to leave indigenous discrimination in the museums and move forward through the 21st Century together as a collective human race.

²⁵ Klein, 115.

²⁶ Hayden, 96.

²⁷ Hayden, Tom. Subcomandante Marcos. Interview by Gabriel García Márquez. *Marcos Speaks: An Interview With Subcomandante Marcos*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002, 180.

²⁸ McCaughan, Michael. *The Zapatista Reader*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002. (1999) 73.

²⁹ Klein, 122.

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