

The Subaltern War Machine. Women, War and Rights

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Writing on the tenth anniversary of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Carlos Monsiváis stated that the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) and subcomandante Marcos:

Comandante Marcos y el EZLN contribuyen enormemente a que se capte la realidad indígena como lo invisibilizado que revela lo falso por parcial de las representaciones autorizadas de lo visible, y a ver en la nación (la Patria, en la retórica del EZLN) a la entidad monopolizada por una minoría que a lo largo de la historia sólo se abre a golpes de protesta, de sobrevivencia y de lucidez.” (Monsiváis, “La sociedad civil y el EZLN”)

(contribute enormously to perceiving indigenous reality as the invisible that reveals the false because partial authorized representations of the visible and the nation (the Fatherland in the rhetoric of the EZLN) as the entity that has been monopolized by a minority that throughout history has responded only to protests for survival and understanding.)

While acknowledging that he could not agree with every decision of the EZLN, Monsiváis praised their impact on civil society as was evident from numerous interventions, and “entre ellas el alegato excepcional de la comandante Esther en el Congreso, y el llamado a la ampliación generosa de la idea de México, formulado por Marcos en el Zocalo” (Monsiváis, “La sociedad civil y el EZLN”) (among them the exceptional accusation of comandante Esther before Congress and the generous broadening of the idea of Mexico formulated by Marcos in the Zocalo). What strikes one about this affirmation is that, after so many funeral orations over the body of the nation state, Monsiváis restores a vision of Mexico as a pluricultural nation that cannot be contained within the old imagined mestizo nation or within the miserable confines of a neoliberal state as facilitator for business interests.

The mention of Comandante Esther's speech on March 28, 2001, to Congress during a discussion of the Law of Indigenous Rights in which she demanded recognition of indigenous women as citizens of a pluricultural nation signaled the extraordinary importance of an event that captured the imagination of society, albeit fleetingly, and focused attention on the symbolic importance of the women members of the CCRI (Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena). Delivered by a Tzotzil woman wearing a native dress and a ski mask that symbolized her status as a clandestine woman warrior, Comandante Esther spoke on behalf of its most marginal inhabitants.¹

Six years later, there has been a wholesale 'forgetting' of the EZLN, now besieged by the army and considered irrelevant. What I want to argue, however, is the continuous 'relevance' of the disruptive politics of Esther and the women EZLN members in demanding rights in the context of the autonomy of communities. Deleuze and Guattari describe war machines as a force external to the state that enjoys a certain measure of autonomy. Among contemporary war machines, they list multinationals, religious organizations, and the local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities which continue to affirm the rights of segmented societies in opposition to the organs of state power. "Bands, no less than worldwide organizations, imply a form irreducible to the State and this form of exteriority necessarily presents itself as a diffuse and polymorphous war machine" (360). Deleuze and Guattari appropriated the term 'war machine' from the historian of classical Rome, Georges Dumézil and from Kleist's *Penthesilea*, a baroque drama in which the Amazons descend on both Greeks and Trojans during the siege of Troy and their queen, Penthesilea, after falling in love with Achilles kills him to remain true to the tribal law" (354–56). What the Amazons refuse are the attributes of gender. In this essay I use war machine in a restricted sense to refer to what both consolidates and menaces the state from its margins.

In Mexico, indigenous communities occupied an ambiguous place both in the colony and the independent nation as subaltern subjects whose labor was necessary but who always posed a potential threat. Although the majority of the Indian population was settled, the threat was dramatically embodied, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the nomadic Apaches who recognized no national boundaries and constituted the ever-present enemy. At the beginning of his autobiographical, *Ulises criollo*, José Vasconcelos had described these savage Indians in terms reminiscent of Sarmiento's *Facundo*. Brought up in Sásabe, in the Sonora desert near Arizona where his father was a customs officer, he describes his fear of the surrounding emptiness:

en torno, la región vastísima de arenas y serranías, seguía dominada por los apaches, enemigo común de las castas blancas y dominadoras: la

hispanica y la anglosajona. Al consumir sus asaltos, los salvajes mataban a los hombres, vejaban a las mujeres: a los niños pequeños los estrellaban contra el suelo y a los mayorcitos los reservaban para la guerra: los adiestraban y utilizaban como combatientes.” (545)

(all around the vast region of sand and hills were still dominated by the Apaches, the common enemy of the dominant Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon white castes. In the assaults, the savages killed men, ravished women and smashed the smallest children into the ground while reserving the older ones for war training them and using them as fighters.) (my translation)

His mother fancifully fantasized that she might die in a raid and that if her son should grow up as a little Apache, he should always remember that there is only one God and Jesus Christ and that this message must be passed on to the Indians. The mother's fantasy is one particular formula for integrating savagery into civilization by constituting an abstract universal, the nation, of course, being another.

In fact, for the developing nation-state nothing could be more useful than an enemy whose wandering way of life was so patently opposed to that of the civis; indeed the confrontation between the savage and the civilized goes back at least as far as the Greeks against the Scythians, the pre-Columbian cities' hostility to the chichimecas, the Argentine campaigns against the Indians of the desert in the nineteenth century and in contemporary European societies, hostility to the Roma; it is the pretext for permanent frontier wars though in the case of the Apaches this would be waged predominantly north of the border.

In contrast, the majority of Mexican indigenous communities had been captured and subjected to a long historical 'civilizing' mission couched in a discourse that was not incompatible with the idea of a primordial indigenous community even though, over four centuries, those indigenous communities had been refashioned. The pre-conquest Indian states were reorganized after the conquest, into Indian Republics (the conquerors often using indigenous nobles to govern them); later, the settled indigenous were brought together into Indian pueblos with limited power but with communal lands. While this fictional cultural autonomy, in the words of June Nash, "masked an exploitative relationship that tapped their labor power in an unequal exchange that benefitted the state and ladino towns, it nevertheless allowed Indians to exercise distinctive cultural practices within the communities," practices which, however, were unfavorable to women (44). Economic subjection was linked to cultural particularism and accentuated by linguistic differences between communities. In the nineteenth century, liberal reform policy destroyed the legal basis for communal lands, which were then taken over by non-indigenous landowners. A whole way of life was thus

threatened and would only be partly salvaged by the Mexican Revolution which altered, without improving, the relation of the indigenous to the nation. “At once ancestor to Mexican nationals’ rights and devoid of nationalist sentiment, the Indian was paradoxically inside and outside the nation—supportive and seditious—in need of full incorporation, regardless of the fact that thousands of Indians had participated in the Revolution” (Saldaña Portillo 205). Indigenous communities supposedly resistant to change were idealized by some as anti-capitalist enclaves while others regarded them as an impediment to modernization. This ambivalence was reflected in fluctuating language policies that vacillated between teaching literacy in indigenous languages or in Spanish, between monolingualism and bilingualism.² The endemic racism was reflected in popular culture and everyday life and affecting all layers of Mexican society.

The primordial indigenous community remained a useful fiction of the State even when it pursued development programs and assimilationist policies through literacy. In fact, however, there was no primordial community, only ways of adapting and dealing with the dominant system while holding on to a communal identity fortified by local cults and practices. In the eighties and nineties even this was imperiled with the collapse of the corporatist state and neoliberal reforms. The NAFTA (North American Free Trade) agreements of 1993 contributed to the destruction of the agrarian base of subsistence. When Salinas de Gortari included corn and beans in NAFTA negotiations thus permitting the importation of cheaper staples from the U.S., and when he allowed the sale of communal lands, “he signaled the end of ejido-and communal-farm-based agriculture in Mexico” (Saldaña Portillo 218). George Collier argues that “Salinas’s advisors reached a consensus that Mexico’s existing peasantry had to be subjected to major surgery, transformed and absorbed into the modernization of agriculture to increase the productivity of millions of peasant-held hectares used for crops not competitive on world markets, or worked by labor that could be put to more productive use elsewhere (85).

The acute land shortage in Chiapas drove indigenous men to migrate to plantations, oil fields or to cities while, within the communities, an exploitative cacique elite dominated their politics. Gender relations were affected by these changes for while migrant male laborers learned Spanish and learned to negotiate with the world outside their communities, women remained behind in the villages. But here too change was accelerated when, in an attempt to resolve the land shortage crisis, the government freed the Lacandon forest for settlement leading to the migration into the forest of *colonos* from different indigenous groups—Chole, Zoque, Nahua, Chinantecos, Tojolobales, Tzeltales, and Tzotziles. These migrations which brought together hitherto separate language groups is one factor in the extraordinary emergence of the indigenous women of Chiapas and their demand for rights, for it also brought them into contact with the then

clandestine Zapatista army whose original members, though not themselves indigenous, were forced by local circumstances to focus on indigenous rights.

Women recruited into the EZLN before the 1994 uprising drew power from their claim to be ‘insurgentas’ (insurgent woman). Their participation and leadership in the January 1994 armed takeover of the Chiapas municipios reinforced their position and the comandantas Ramona, Ana Maria and Esther became powerful public speakers.³ They deliberately refused to be known by the supposedly comprehensive term, ‘insurgente’ (insurgent). Subcomandante Marcos has never ceased to celebrate the participation of women in the armed uprising. In a commemoration for Mother’s Day in March 1996, he singled out the twelve women warriors of the twelfth year and described one of them in the following fashion:

Although her face is wreathed in black, still one can see a few strands of hair upon her forehead and the eyes with a spark of one who searches. In front, she holds an M-1 carbine in the assault position. She has a pistol strapped to her waist. Over the left side of the chest, that place where hopes and convictions reside, she carries the rank of infantry major of an insurgent army that has called itself, this cold dawn of January 1, 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army.

The speech ended with a reference to Juana, wife of Marcos’s Indian sage, old Antonio whom he describes as being reborn in 1994 when she began to weave “the complex dream some call hope.” “Uncomfortable’ Mexican women go on weaving history that without them is a badly constructed fable” (Subcomandante Marcos, “Women in the Twelfth Year”). The Women’s Revolutionary Law that was drawn up in the Lacandon forest by the insurgentas, was the blueprint for a correction of: “the badly constructed fable.”

The Women’s Revolutionary Law was drawn up in 1993 and made public in January 1994.⁴ Not only did the law condemn forced marriage, rape, domestic violence and the right to decide on the number of children, the right to education and “the right to participate in the affairs of the community and hold positions of authority if they are freely and democratically elected.”⁵ They acknowledged the prevalence of domestic violence in indigenous communities when they decreed, “No woman may be beaten or mistreated physically, either by members of her family or by others. The crimes of rape and attempted rape will be severely punished.”⁶ What empowered the women was that they were members of an army, carried weapons and had acquired basic education. The list of rights was incorporated into the Zapatista platform and would later become the focus of discussion at a series of National Indigenous Women’s meetings. What is extraordinary about the document is that it drove a wedge into the very heart

of the primordial community.

The indigenous women of Chiapas had already come together in various associations and in 1997 a National Council of Indigenous Women was founded and formulated its objective as “cambiar permaneciendo y permanecer cambiando.”⁷ At a workshop in San Cristóbal de las Casas in May 1994, women of several different language groups demanded “respect for our traditions, those that are beneficial to all women, men and children.” Although not explicitly stated, these demands question the notion of tradition as the inert weight of accumulated practices and pose new criteria—respect, dignity—for the community. In 1996, a government commission came to an agreement with the Zapatistas on the subject of Indigenous Rights and Culture. This agreement, known as the San Andrés Accords is the mainstay of the Zapatista movement, although, because the Zapatistas refused to accept changes proposed by the government, they were never officially ratified, leading to a stalemate that has persisted to the present.

A central concept of the Accords was indigenous autonomy, especially the right “to elect their authorities and exercise their internal forms of government in agreement with their norms in the confines of their autonomy, guaranteeing the participation of women under the conditions of equity” (“The History and Importance of the San Andrés Accords”). Autonomy is a key concept in the indigenous program and is the topic of major debates throughout the Americas. Rodolfo Stavenhagen noted that collective autonomies (as distinct from individual autonomy) “will be conditioned by limitations imposed through the autonomy of its own members—in essence their universal human rights—and by the collective rights of other groups (communities, municipalities, state nations) which claim their own legal, political or historical—but not necessarily human—rights and which may be in competition or conflict with the entity in question.” As Stavenhagen goes on to argue, demands for autonomy need to be understood in relation to “a long history of oppression, exclusion and exploitation” (18). The indigenous demand for autonomy is related to territory and to control over natural resources while political autonomy involves the adaptation of traditional forms of government and law. Thus it is argued that the subject of autonomy must tackle “at least four fundamental issues: firstly, the identity of the subjects of autonomy; secondly, the scope and limits of autonomy; thirdly, the responsibilities which will be devolved to the autonomous entity and; fourthly, the legal framework which will govern relations between the State and the autonomous units” (Burguete Cal y Mayor 17). Stavenhagen also points out that autonomy may be demanded for the community (the township or village with its lands and fields), the municipality, the ‘indigenous people’ and the indigenous or pluriethnic region.

This is a complex issue that extends far beyond the Zapatista-controlled

regions of Chiapas, where autonomous municipalities began to be established in the mid-nineties and included not only indigenous but also pluriethnic communities. Indigenous women, however, have added their own interpretation to incorporate the rights of individuals. Thus at the Fourth Assembly of the Plural National Indigenous Assembly for Autonomy (ANIPA), national proposals regarding indigenous women were agreed upon such as, “the right to be autonomous as women, to receive training, to seek spaces and mechanisms through which we will be listened to in community assemblies and to hold positions of responsibility. It also means facing up to our fears and daring to take decisions and participate, seeking financial independence, to have independence in the family and to continue gaining information, for knowledge leads to autonomy.”⁸ A meeting of indigenous women of the same organization agreed “to discuss the proposal for autonomy of Indian peoples from a gender perspective,” demanding “an autonomy which includes the voice, face and conscience of women, thus will we be able to reconstruct the female half of the community, the half that has been forgotten.”⁹

In her address to the House of Representatives Comandante Esther did not appear to view individual rights as in any way conflicting with the autonomy of indigenous peoples. Thus she stated: “we want our manner of dressing recognized, of speaking, of governing, of organizing, of praying, of curing, our method of working in collectives, of respecting the land and of understanding life, which is nature, of which we are a part.”

In “A Woman’s Eye View of Autonomy,” jointly written by a Colombian activist, Nellys Palomo and Margarita Gutierrez who belongs to the Hañu people of Hidalgo and advised the EZLN during the San Andrés Accords, argued that there had to be changes in order to preserve good customs and eradicate the bad. “Habits and customs must be good for all men and women, if they are not it is not good that they remain in place: on the contrary, they must change” (56). This does not mean forgoing autonomy but modifying its internal structure: “we are in agreement with the preservation of a custom as long as it respects the human rights of women” (75). They argue that autonomy means among other things, having access to resources, having the legal instruments to protect indigenous rights, the democratization of national political life and the establishment of a true rule of law based on legal pluralism, the right of people to defend their interests and control their lives and resources, the biodiversity of their territories, to exercise political rights, to respect the law and customs of their ancestors and recognition as subjects with rights.” And for women this goes along with a democratization of the home. This means “that in order to implement autonomy from a woman’s perspective, a number of processes that take individuality as their starting point must be taken into account, not forgetting that these occur in relation to other people, the community, the family and the region” (57).

Yet it has also been argued that to introduce individual rights into the demand for communal autonomy undermines the latter by smuggling into the mix and under the guise of human rights the neoliberal value of individualism. Can individuality be defended as distinct from individualism?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has criticized the use of Human Rights as a political strategy of the First World, as an imposition that ignores the need for empowerment at the lowest level. I do not believe this criticism applies in this case where women from the most excluded groups of Mexican society call for equality with men from a position on the margins or outside the state. Judith Butler glossing Spivak argues:

The struggle to think hegemony anew is not quite possible, however, without inhabiting precisely that line where the norms of legitimacy, increasingly adjudicated by state apparatuses of various kinds, break down, where liminal social existence emerges in the condition of suspended ontology. Those who would ideally be included within any operation of the universal find themselves not only outside its terms but at the very outside without which the universal could not be formulated, living as the trace, the spectral remainder which does not have a home in the forward march of the universal. (178)

This twilight zone of the ‘unspeakable’ and the ‘unspoken’ raises the question of whether it is possible to translate claims without augmenting the power of the dominant. Spivak herself urges a kind of base education for the rural poor that is aimed at something other than making the rural poor “capable of drafting NGO grant proposal,” but she does not address the situation of insurgent women. The Zapatistas and the indigenous women of Mexico are able to use the hegemonic language of rights strategically to improve their own position without surrendering the notion of autonomy. Laclau has argued that the universal is an empty place that can only be filled in different contexts, by concrete particulars:

The appeal to the universal is unavoidable once, on the one hand, no agent can claim to speak directly for the ‘totality,’ while, on the other, reference to the latter remains an essential component of the hegemonic-discursive operation. The universal is an empty place, a void which can be filled only by the particular, but which, through its very emptiness produces a series of crucial effects in the structuration/destructuration of social relations. (58)

If we accept this view, the appeal to women’s rights encompasses a series of particularities but they do not necessarily add up to capitalist individualism.

At this point, it is helpful to situate the discussion within the context of national politics. As Shannon Speed has argued, the Zapatista uprising

fundamentally altered the Mexican state's position on collective rights leading it to emphasize individual rights in contrast to the indigenous emphasis on collectives. Activated by their opposition to the EZLN, the Congress and Senate attempted to present themselves as defenders of individual rights against the possible abuses of the community. Their Law of Indigenous Rights and Culture (that was different from a proposal submitted by President Fox in April 2001) was rejected both by the Zapatistas and by the Indigenous National Congress. What was perverse in the Senate version of the law was that protection of women's rights became an argument against indigenous autonomy. It stated that the authorities and representatives within the communities must guarantee equal participation of women in conditions of equality and "respect the federal pact and sovereignty of the states." This opaque language while apparently supporting women's rights delivered a paternalistic message and ignored the fact that indigenous communities were already engaged in substantial debates and changes in tradition. As a commentator in *La Jornada* pointed out indigenous communities were consulted and the congresses of Baja California, Sinaloa, Zacatecas, estado de México, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Morelos, Hidalgo, Puebla and Chiapas where the majority of the indigenous resided voted against it.¹⁰

Shannon Speed has argued that while the national discussions pitted defenders women's rights against those who defended cultural rights, both sides "are united by an underlying adherence to notions of liberal individualism inscribed in the Mexican Constitution and the popular consciousness of much of Mexico—that the rights and equality of individuals should always have primacy and that these rights are always inherently put at risk by the collective" (308). Her in-depth study of one particular community—the Tzeltal community of Nicolás Ruiz—where a rift had developed between Zapatista women who argued for the need to "struggle for women's rights in the collective context of the community" and others who emphasized women's rights over community. The value of her essay is that it depicts the local struggle in the framework of the Mexican state's promotion of a neoliberal agenda that divests the state of responsibility for social welfare. The state maintains the law and order necessary for market forces to function and "produces subjects who are autonomous and self-regulating." While many Latin American nations have embraced multiculturalism (for instance, appointing indigenous ministers and electing indigenous representatives) this has not been the case in Mexico, primarily because of the ongoing struggle against the EZLN. Because the Zapatista communities present "an alternative form and logic of governance to that proffered by the Mexican state," the government has embraced an opposition based on 'individual rights' and their need to be defended against possible abuse by communities whereas the Zapatistas are finding ways to defend rights without abandoning the notion of autonomous

communities.

The ‘failure’ of the Zapatistas is a constant theme in Mexico, the subject of diatribes, novels and political commentary. The massive army presence in Chiapas has, however, more to do with the ‘failure’ than EZLN policies and experiments. On the other hand, their exodus from the neoliberal state has considerably appealed throughout Latin America as I have argued elsewhere. It is time to appreciate and learn from their contribution to the discussion of women and human rights rather than dwell on their supposed defeat. As the discussions of Mexico’s indigenous women demonstrates, ‘rights’ are not necessarily the privileged domain of bourgeois individualism.

Notes

1. Available on the web in English: www.zmag.org/chiapas/estmar28.htm.
2. See Heath, *Telling Tongues. Language Police in Mexico: Colony to Nation*.
3. See Pérez, and Castellanos, “No nos dejen solas. Entrevista con la comandanta Ramona.”
4. The law was drawn up before the Zapatista army left the forest and took over several municipalities.
5. A second and amended version was issued in 1996.
6. For the full list, see Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas* 255.
7. Hernández Castillo lists these associations but credits the EZLN for providing the first public forum for indigenous women. See especially 64.
8. See Ruiz Hernández 24–45, especially 37.
9. See Gutiérrez and Palomo.
10. See Enciso L. “Rotuno rechazo y preocupación por parte de organizaciones indígenas.”

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