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AUTONOMY BEGINS AT HOME: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE ON INDIGENOUS AUTONOMY MOVEMENTS¹

June C. Nash

ABSTRACT

Mayas living in the western highlands of Chiapas, Mexico are defining a new relationship with the national government. Rejecting paternalistic forms of development and military repression with which the nation in which they live have tried to eradicate their culture, Mayas are now asserting the right to autonomy within regions where they constitute a majority. I argue that the movement for autonomy based on collective norms of Mayan culture is most acute in areas that were the least incorporated in the 1910-1917 Mexican Revolution and have become important because of mineral, water, and genetic biodiversity that are attracting global investors. The strategies for practicing autonomy developed by indigenous municipalities and campesino organizations in distinct regional settings provide them with patterns for organizing themselves as distinct entities and for participating in national and global settings. Gender differences in all these settings influence the interpretation of autonomy as it is practiced in the communities that have declared themselves as autonomous. I shall compare these practices in regionally distinct settings of Chiapas in an attempt to demonstrate how this enters in to the formulation of an alternative model for pluricultural coexistence in the global ecumene.

Keywords: gender, anthropology, indigenous movements, autonomy, Chiapas, Maya

RESUMEN

Los mayas que habitan las tierras altas en el oeste de Chiapas, México están definiendo una nueva relación con el gobierno nacional. Rechazando las formas paternalistas de desarrollo y la represión con que la nación en que viven ha tratado de erradicar su cultura, los mayas están haciendo valer su derecho a la autonomía en las regiones donde constituyen una mayoría. En este artículo expongo que el movimiento en busca de autonomía basado en las normas colectivas de la cultura maya es más fuerte en las áreas que fueron menos incorporadas durante la Revolución Mexicana de 1910-1917 y han atraído a los inversionistas globales por su biodiversidad mineral, acuífera y genética. Las estrategias para implementar la autonomía desarrolladas por las municipa-

lidades indígenas y organizaciones campesinas en distintos escenarios regionales les proveen patrones para organizarse como entidades definidas y para participar en escenarios nacionales y globales. Las diferencias de género en todos estos escenarios influyen en la interpretación de la autonomía según se practica en las comunidades que se han declarado autónomas. Compararé estas prácticas en distintos escenarios de Chiapas en un intento para demostrar cómo esto interviene en la formulación de un modelo alternativo para la coexistencia pluricultural en el ecúmeno global.

Palabras clave: género, antropología, movimientos indígenas, autonomía, Chiapas, maya

RÉSUMÉ

Les mayas qui vivent dans les hauteurs de l'ouest de Chiapas du Mexique sont en train de négocier une nouvelle relation avec le gouvernement de cette nation. Cette communauté tente de faire valoir son autonomie principalement dans les régions où elle est majoritaire et s'oppose à toutes formes de paternalisme de développement et de répression au sein de cette même nation qui a essayé d'éradiquer leur culture. Dans cet article j'explore comment le mouvement qui lutte pour son autonomie en se basant sur les normes collectives de la culture maya comme les plus fortes durant la révolution Mexicaine de 1910-1917, ces normes favorisaient aux entrepreneurs à cause de sa biodiversité minérale, aquifère, et génétique. Les stratégies de l'implantation de l'autonomie appliquée dans les différents secteurs de la région des communes indigènes et des organisations paysannes présentent des modèles dont l'objectif est de créer des institutions pour participer dans des actions nationales et globales. Les différences de genre dans toutes ces actions ont une influence sur l'interprétation de l'autonomie selon la tradition de communautés déclarées autonomes. A partir d'une comparaison de ces pratiques venant de différente partie de Chiapas, j'essaie de démontrer dans un cadre général les conséquences de cette influence dans un model comme un alternatif de l'existence pluriculturelle.

Mots-clés: genre, anthropologie, mouvements indigènes, autonomie, Chiapas, maya

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Introduction

At the turn of the third millennium, indigenous people of the western hemisphere are becoming protagonists in a changed relationship with the states within which they have been subordinated. In their movements for autonomy they call for pluricultural coexistence, rejecting the intolerance for difference in education, religion, and political participation. They have emerged from a tumultuous half-century beginning with the first national indigenous congress of 1974 in Chiapas and culminating with the United Nations declaration on cultural rights. The declarations emanating from these entities were promoted in the 1992 Quincentennial celebration of 500 Years of Survival as Distinct Cultures the Charter of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests adopted at the Rio de Janeiro conference on ecology in 1992. The charter proposed that:

Indigenous communities possess what can be described as an environmental ethic, not abstractly stated in biological terms, but built on specific experiences by a specific group of people living in a particular locale with sacred ties to the land. (IUCN Intercommission Task Force on Indigenous People 1997:27)

Based on this summary approval, the participants in the Rio Conference endorsed tribal peoples as custodians of the land. Indigenous women began organizing separately from men since they felt excluded from the male-dominated agenda in the general congresses. Three years after the Rio de Janeiro conference, they defined their relation to global ecological change at the Beijing Women's Tribunal in these terms:

The Earth is our Mother. From her we get our life, and our ability to live. It is our responsibility to care for our mother, as we care for ourselves. Women, all females, are manifestations of Mother Earth in human form. (Quoted in Turpel 1990)

As custodians of the domestic economy, indigenous women are key agents in the preservation of their environment. In their daily work in providing food and health care for their families and communities, they have proven their knowledge and skill in maintaining continuous residence in environments that are havens for a rich diversity of faunal and floral organisms. In the current phase of capitalist penetration of the rainforest and highland reserves to which indigenous people had withdrawn, women see the imminent destruction of a way of life (Aguirre Beltrán 1967). They are taking the lead in challenging the right of the invaders to expropriate resources and the land as they see their centuries' old survival techniques threatened directly.

In this article, I shall discuss the role of Mayan women in advancing

the movement for autonomy in Mexico. Their struggle, while linked with that of men, takes on a special dimension in their defense of semisubsistence cultivators and artisans. Their project is linked to the special concerns of the small-scale domestic economy that enabled indigenous people to survive, as culturally distinct entities within Spanish colonial and independence nation.

The concerns of women in racially-marginalized regions were central to the work of Helen Safa from her first field trip in poor urban neighborhoods of Puerto Rico to her investigation of the impact of offshore assembly operations in Puerto Rico and other areas of the Caribbean (Safa 1974, 1983, 1995). Subsequent comparative work with women in Cuba and Brazil confirmed her thesis that, regardless of national priorities, women's status as central figures in the reproduction and maintenance of family and community failed to ensure their recognition in supra-local political and economic spheres. I shall address these central concerns in my research in highland indigenous communities of Chiapas, Mexico where I have worked over the past half century. I will focus on Mayan women's intervention in the struggles of indigenous people to regain the autonomy of indigenous communities.

The de facto autonomy resulting from neglect of communities by the federal government throughout the colonial and independence period was interrupted by the revolutionary policies institutionalized by Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). He and subsequent presidents of the Party of the Institutional Revolution (*Partido de la Revolución Institucional*, or PRI) introduced schools, medical attention, and sanitation programs, expanding the indigenous policies to include access to banking and credit for rural small-holders (Ruiz Hernández 1994; Rus 1994, 1995). For the first time in post-conquest history, indigenous men were able to vote and hold political office in indigenous communities. Land reform grants allocated to male heads of family maintained the domestic economy, but left in doubt the autonomy of women. Although the national government granted the right to vote to women in 1950, indigenous women were deprived by "*usos y costumbre*" (uses and customs) to take part in the political life in indigenous pueblos, and though they worked in the *milpa* along with men, they had no rights to *ejido* grants upon the death of a male family members unless they had a male child fourteen years or older. By the same token, they could be given in marriage without their consent to a man by their parents or by their brothers.

The control by indigenous men of the domestic economy in which women were subordinated was strengthened in the decades following the Revolution of 1910 and the articles of the 1917 Constitution. President Carlos Salinas in 1992 ended the revolutionary compact with small plot cultivators by "reforming" the Land Reform Article 27 of the 1917

Constitution by legalizing private sales of lands, and by signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Instead of subsidizing small plot cultivators, the Agreement pitted them against heavily subsidized corn and bean producers in the United States by opening their markets to the sale of these crops from the north. In the Lacandón and Chimalapas forest preserves, colonizers who were invited to migrate to these areas by the federal government were caught between the invasion of foreign commercial interests invited by the national governments eager to raise revenues from commercial sales of the resources, and ecological preservationists (Arizpe, Paz, and Velásquez 1993; Collier 1994; Nash 2001).

During the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, women had become the predominant work force in the subsistence sector since men often were forced into migratory streams to get much needed cash. They were the least favored sector in receiving public services, whether in education, health, nutrition, or even the cooptive government programs for small plot cultivators. Men received the Procampo assistance for cultivators—Procampo was a program designed to support small plot cultivators hit by NAFTA policies (Stephen 2002:66-67)—and male officials in indigenous towns received the money for public projects. Since there was little accounting of how this was spent, men often used it for what they considered to be personal ownership of cars, trucks, and cattle.

Even though women's suffrage was guaranteed by national law in 1950, indigenous women were prevented from voting by their own communities. As the PRI government turned to military force against protestors, women became the targets of military and paramilitary forces. The concurrent rise of indigenous women's stature in global settings fostered by United Nations and NGOs, along with their challenge to subordination in male dominant families and communities, have intensified gender conflict. Women rose up in arms with men during the Chiapas uprising of January 1, 1994, and women were directly confronting military forces in their homes and communities. I have seen the colonizers of Patiwitz in the Lacandón rainforest refuse gifts of food offered as appeasement on Mother's Day, four months after the February 9, 1995 invasion of government troops ordered by then-president Ernesto Zedillo. I have also seen videos showing women pushing the soldiers out of their towns, and linking arms with other women to prevent tanks from rolling into the villages of the Lacandón. They taunt the young soldiers who appear to be Indians, in their native language.

By taking such stands against these quintessentially male military institutions in their midst, women have become a major force resisting government cooptation that had demoralized male caciques in traditional communities. The challenge to male dominance that characterized indigenous pueblos is not lost on men of their own communities. Abuse

of women in the conflict zone has risen, and in one case a woman was killed by her husband for trying to attend a political meeting.

I shall discuss here the question of how Zapatista communities are addressing the transition from an armed uprising to a civilian movement for autonomy in a pluricultural nation. To what degree have women succeeded in furthering their autonomy in a world wherein men, however poor and disprivileged as citizens in a racialized world, enjoyed priorities in political, social and domestic life within their own communities? How has the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) attempted to transform their ranks as autonomous communities in the context of military repression exerted by the state in its predatory advance in the national territories they occupy?

Unity in Armed Struggle

We men and women, united and free, are aware that the war we declare is an extreme but just act. The dictators have been applying an undeclared genocidal war against our pueblos for many years. Therefore we ask your determined participation in support of the plan of the Mexican pueblo that is fighting for work, land, shelter, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice, and peace. We declare that we will not stop fighting until we succeed in fulfilling these basic demands of our pueblo, forming a government of our free and democratic government.

— Flier distributed by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation on New Year's Eve, 1994

Four things are notable in the statement. One is the unity of the armed troop of 2,000 men and women, 40 percent of whom were female. Second is the unity of poor people united by common demands for basic needs. Third is the claim for subsistence economy as the basic unit of action. Finally, there is the linkage of democracy as the basis for freedom and justice.

The spark ignited by the EZLN uprising spread to a much wider population that consisted of indigenous people mobilized by the Catholic Base Communities inspired by Liberation Theology as disseminated by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, as well as to indigenous people mobilized by the Indigenous Congress of 1974, and the Celebration of the 1992 Quincentennial Celebration. Indigenous women had, since the 1970s, been gaining leadership potential in cooperative organizations for the sale of artisan products that gave them a political arena in which to address their concerns as women (Nash 1993a, 1993b). They were also involved along with men in the National Association of Indigenes "Plan de Ayala" (NAPA), the Center of Agricultural Workers and Campesinos

that fought for the rights of gender in relation to the rights of autonomy (CIOAC), and Xi' Nich', the Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Freedom, the Reunion to Resolve Our Problems, and the Union of Ejidos. For women the association with other women from many different pueblos was even more dramatic a change than for men, yet they adapted to the new organizations still retaining their cellular structure related to particular places and communities. During the years following the uprising, these groups coalesced to form the basis for the autonomy movement that exceeded the initial economic demands.

The meaning of autonomy in Zapatista settlements and in the Christian Base Communities goes beyond that of the more commonly used term liberty in western society. It does not, as Zapatistas say, mean to be free of all constraints, but to accept the collective will as one's own. Nor does it mean unlimited privileges, but rather to earn the rights of belonging through responsible participation.

Distinct meaning of autonomy emerged soon after the cease fire was signed between the government and the EZLN. Sixteen days after the uprising, on January 12, 1994 women participating in the Zapatista communities set forth their Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle. This was released in the *Financial News* under the banner "Women's Revolutionary Law" (Stephen 1997:179-183). The ten demands amplified the ten basic demands of the EZLN calling for the right to marry the man of their choice, to have the number of children they could care for, to have a voice and vote in local politics, and to hold office. They wanted to make their voice heard in all discussions of *usos y costumbres*, since, as they pointed out, these often increased women's subordination.

The premises of autonomy stated in the San Andrés Accord co-signed by government representatives and the EZLN on February 16, 1996 include self-governance of regions in which the indigenous population constitutes a majority, with the right to designate culturally appropriate educational, social and economic programs in accord with ancestral practices. The Zapatistas have emphasized the rights of indigenous peoples to control at least ten percent of the revenues from natural resources within their regions for collectively designated programs. Since an "ocean of oil"² is believed to exist beneath the lands occupied by the settlers of the Lacandón, this could have meant that a sizeable share of federal revenues would come directly under the control of indigenous peoples. Chiapas is also the state with the highest capacity for generating hydroelectric power, supplying national needs and exporting power to Guatemala. Few of the settlements are connected to the high power transmitters that pass overhead. The San Andrés Accord also includes provisions for pluriethnic representation and coordination in municipal councils, regional general assemblies and executive commissions. The

communities in the autonomous territories would select representatives who would participate in state representative organizations and in the Congress of the Union. Within the territories that would be affected, indigenous forms of government by consensus and communal sharing of the proceeds from collective production activities are called for along with a general claim to govern by "traditional uses and customs."

Women in the National Indigenous Congress and the EZLN conventions have made a significant departure from autonomy movements in their objection to the unqualified acceptance of "uses and customs," stating that there are bad traditions as well as good, and that the tradition of forced marriages at an early age, alcoholism, wife abuse, and other premises of gender inequality should be drastically altered.

Indigenous modes of organization especially in the northern borderlands of Chiapas differ from the nationally and regionally based organizations of campesinos. Bees and ants number among the auxiliaries to Mayan heroes and gods that embody the metaphoric qualities of collective action. The observed tendencies of insects to carry out collective goals through the autonomous activities of constituent entities were metaphorically extended to self-designations for campesino action groups and colonies of exiled or expelled Mayas. The names given to their resistance groups, such as "*La Hormiga*" (the Ant), the settlement of exiled Chamulans on the outskirts of San Cristóbal, and "*Abejas*" (Bees) in Chenalhó to the Christian-based resistance to government repression in the nineties, provide clues to the collective bases of Mayan organizational practices exemplified in the behavior of insects.

The indigenous people of the Northern Frontier of Chiapas, now constituted as the Autonomous Pluriethnic Region, are explicit in the metaphoric connections for naming their group "Abejas" as the following notice of their organization indicates:

We came together in 1992 because we are a multitude and we want to build our house like the honeycomb where we all work collectively and we all enjoy the same thing, producing honey for everyone. So we are like the bees in one hive. We don't allow divisions, and we all march together with our queen, which is the reign of God, although we knew from the beginning that the work would be slow but sure.

A resident of Acteal, a hamlet of Tzotzil-speaking exiles from the municipal of Chenalhó, with whom I spoke when I visited in January, 2001, said that this designation came to them as they were walking in the peregrination to celebrate the 1992 "500 Years of Resistance" celebration. The Bees Civil Society (*Sociedad Civil Las Abejas*) consider themselves to be the civilian support bases for the EZLN, but make it very clear that they are for peaceful means of exerting their strength through fasting and prayer, not by force of arms. Twenty-five of these

Christian Base Communities in the municipality of Chenalhó came together to object to the attempts of PRI officials and paramilitaries to force them to take up arms against the EZLN. When they refused, they became the target of paramilitary bands operating in the northern region (Rojas 1995).

This notion of a society as an organic whole enters into and inspires some of the collectivist approaches to governance that are fundamental to the practice of Christian Base Communities. The expressed lack of confidence in electoral politics comes from their experience with these forms of governance.

Forging a Pluriethnic Base

Given the marginalized position of the Northern Frontier and the lack of control by the PRI over caciques, the towns in this region were the first to affirm the right to autonomy after the Zapatista uprising. The AEDPCH presented the Proposal for the Creation of Autonomous Pluriethnic Regions at a meeting in the Central Plaza of San Cristóbal on October 12, 1994. Communities organized as the General Council of Autonomous Pluriethnic Regions picked up the proclamation of the principle of autonomy. This included dozens of organizations in the region of Los Altos that were, in effect, acting on the premises of autonomy. It also included the 37 communities claimed as Zapatista strongholds in the rain forest near Ocosingo after the Zapatista uprising in 1994, the central valleys of Cintalapa, including Tojolobales and Tzeltales of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, who put the proposal into action on January 21, 1995 when they declared themselves autonomous entities.

With the growing repression of the EZLN after the cessation of the dialogues in August 1996, the coordination of the interactions of campesinos and indigenes as a working class and civil society sector was undertaken by the Independent Center of Agricultural Workers and Campesinos (CIOAC).³ More than any other contemporary campesino organization, CIOAC embodies the aspirations and strategies of the Bees and Ants as they rebuild society from the bottom up. Each unit has responsibility for its actions, yet all act in concert to undermine unjust authority and to construct the base for a new society. The regional indigenous and campesino organizations provide a civic network that fed into broader political actions throughout the state of Chiapas. This introduced a plurality of visions that posed new modes of civic action through a collective strength that overcomes formidable opposition.

It is significant that the Northern Frontier of the state was the first to make autonomy a priority and to enact it in the dozen pueblos that

constitute the zone made up principally of Ch'ol-speaking people (Alejos García 1994). Comparing the region with the highland municipalities and the Lacandón rain forest, we can point to the characteristics that led to their decisions to take the leadership. The region has been relatively cut off from the federal government and did not benefit from state redistributive programs. This also removed them from the cooptation patterns that characterized relations of the highland municipalities with the federal and state government programs of indigenism. The denial of equality in those relations even while espousing the glory of the indigenous past had undermined the principles of autonomy and respect not only between indigenes and the state bureaucracy, but it had corroded interpersonal relations in the highland municipalities. Ch'oles were among the colonizers in the Lacandón rainforest who were the first to be arbitrarily expropriated when the PRI government assigned lands on which they settled to the Lacandón Indians as part of a bioreserve. The inhabitants of other settlements joined the Union of Ejidos Quiptic ta Lecubtesel (United by Our Force) to protest the injustice of this act, uniting 75 communities of Ch'oles, Tzotziles, and Tzeltales (Legorreta Díaz 1998:96 et seq.; Pérez Chacón 1993). As indigenous people elaborate their own organizations, they are forging an alternative model for pluricultural coexistence in an expanded civil society.

The Advent of Indigenous Women in Civil Society

The parallel engagement of indigenous women in constituent organizations of National Association of Indigenes Plan de Ayala (*Asociación Nacional Indígena Plan de Ayala*, ANIPA) (Díaz Polanco 1992, 1997; Mattiace 1997) and in the campesino organizations such as the Independent Center of Agricultural Workers and Campesinos (*Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos*, CIOAC) deepened the participation of indigenes in civil society by their assertion of the rights of gender in relation to the rights of autonomy. Three organizations that united women in the Lacandón rain forest and communities of support in the highlands formed an umbrella organization called Xi' Nich' included the Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Freedom, the Reunion to Resolve Our Problems, and the Union of Communities of the Chiapas Jungle. For women, the association with women from many different pueblos was even more dramatic a change than for men, yet they adapted to the new organizations, still retaining their cellular structure. Their statement formulated at the fourth assembly of ANIPA in December, 1995 demonstrates the importance of defining autonomy in instrumental terms:

Autonomy for us women implies the right to be autonomous, we, as women, to train ourselves, to seek spaces and mechanisms in order to be heard in the communal assemblies and to have posts. It also implies facing the fear that we have in order to dare to take decisions and to participate, to seek economic independence, to have independence in the family, to continue informing ourselves because understanding gives us autonomy. To be able to participate in this type of reunion enables us to diffuse the experiences of women and animate others to participate. (Gutiérrez and Paloma 1999:83)

Women show a clear awareness of their responsibility in cultivating the practice of autonomy in society as well as in the home and family, since it is there that children are enculturated in the patterns that define future behavior. Those women who live in fear of abuse, who accept subordination in the home, harbor sentiments of low esteem that reproduce subordination and marginalization. Indigenous women have unified their movement at a national level in the National Coalition of Indigenous Women of Mexico (CONAMIM) that also belongs to the continental organization of indigenous women. The militarization of the conflict with the federal troops invading the jungle in 1995 further united women who became the most vocal opponents of the war.⁴ Women distributed leaflets bearing their denunciation of the military in their communities during their March for Peace on March 8, 1995. Looking more like a religious procession than a political movement, as they carried flowers and candles along with babies on their backs, and with their leaders wafting incense to mark their way, the women from throughout the Diocese marched through the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Their leaflets and the speeches announced from loudspeakers in the central park protested the invasion of their communities and the deployment of troops in the rain forest. As Gutiérrez and Paloma (1999), representatives in the Women's Indigenous Convention, argued:

We are educated to serve in house and communities. Families give preference to boys while girls leave school to work in the house. The government does not give credit or land to women. We do not work for wages, and we have nothing to pay for cultivation. When we ask for legal aid, officials ask for a marriage license, and if we are not married, they say they will not write a warrant. Women cannot be officials in their communities, and do not have the right to a voice, and our word is not worthwhile in court. With the bad treatment we receive, we see rage and suffering as something normal. We seek democratic and harmonious relations with equality and without discrimination and the sharing of household responsibilities.

As a result of the discrimination they have experienced within male organizations, women have formed separate groups within campesino

and indigenous organizations to establish their own agenda as protagonists for change. Women reject traditions that negate their own autonomy and the welfare of the family such as alcoholism, spousal abuse, and the exclusion of women from communal decision-making. They assert that the only way to overcome the relations with men that oppress women must be transformed by relating to organizations of women, where women can consider their own identity. Indigenous women can state with pride, as they did in the Convention of Indigenous women in 1997, "The great cultural richness of our pueblos has been maintained, reproduced, and enriched by we women." They have defined as a future objective the prevention of the exploitative use by outsiders of "this richness used in a manner foreign to our view of life." Because of their responsibilities in the family and community, changes of the sort women are experiencing can radically change expectations of what behaviors are acceptable, not only in the intimate spheres of the home but now, increasingly, in the mainstream of political protest and action (Gutiérrez and Paloma 1999:71).

Participation of women in civil society has transformed the action and ideology guiding political life in the state. It has at the same time threatened some sectors, particularly male youths of indigenous communities, who sense a loss of their control over women's labor and bodies at the same time that they are losing a sense of their own future in a declining agrarian economy. As the repositories of culture in indigenous communities that relied on women's exclusion from the dominant sectors of political and social life to preserve cultural traditions, women's demands for full participation in the emergent civil society is a premonition of the end of cacique co-optation and other features of male hegemony during the PRI monopoly of power. Women's assertion of autonomy is, thus, crucial for the attainment of indigenous autonomy (IUCN Intercommission Task Force on Indigenous Peoples 1997).

The Intervention of Military Forces in the Conflict Area

By habituating people to the ubiquitous presence of the military in the Lacandón area after the intervention of the army in February 1995, the army hoped to overcome the resistance of the people and undermine their ability to manage their own lives. This was combined with a concerted attempt to escalate the violence by arming pro-government paramilitary groups. In June, 1995 Mexican military and government officials were consulting with their Guatemalan counterparts on counterinsurgency "to ask about our experience in tactics, on explosives and on guerrilla counterinsurgency," according to a Guatemalan military officer (*New York Times*, June 6, 1995, p. 5). Military action backed up

by divisive political practices that have been part of the PRI corporatist strategies since its origin aimed at fragmenting civil society and reconstructing it along militaristic lines from the time of the invasion by federal troops on February 9, 1995. The army succeeded in splitting the ARIC by promising that their villages would not be burned if they accepted a barracks for soldiers within their limits. Those that accepted the barracks now oppose themselves as ARIC *Unión de Uniones* (or ARIC/PRI as it is sometimes called) to the ARIC *Independiente*.

The most intense paramilitary conflicts occurred in the borderlands of these highland indigenous municipalities with the Northern Frontier and Lacandón rain forest areas. Hamlets of the highland municipalities, particularly those in the lower altitudes of San Andrés Sacam Chen (formerly Larrainzar) and Chenalhó adjacent to the Northern Frontier, were breaking away from the town centers that were controlled by PRI officials. These hamlets formed the Pluricultural Autonomous Regions (*Regiones Autónomas Pluricultural*) in the North and in nearby municipalities of Chenalhó.

The PRI government failed to address the complaints of independent campesino groups, funneling its resources into its supportive organizations, Solidarity of Campesinos and Teachers (*Solidaridad de Campesinos Magisterial*, SOCAMO) and Peace and Justice (*Paz y Justicia*). These heavily-armed groups of PRI supporters in the north had parallels in Los Chinchulines in the Ocosingo area and the San Bartolomé Alliance of the Plains of Venustiano Carranza (*Alianzas San Bartolomé de Los Llanos*) in Venustiano Carranza. They were not, as the government claims “clandestine armed groups” (*grupos armados clandestinos*), but rather “parallel armed groups” (*grupos armados paralelos*) promoting the militarization of Chiapas. As such, they were an integral part of counter-insurgency attack on opposition parties and Zapatista supporters, formed in the wake of the disintegration of PRI hegemony in Chiapas.

From the time that Julio César Ruiz Ferro took power as governor of Chiapas on February 14, 1995, right after the invasion of the Lacandón rain forest, up until a successor Albores Guillen was appointed because of civic protest, more than 1,500 indigenous Chiapanecos were killed, mostly in confrontations between PRI and PRD members (*La Jornada*, December 28, 1997, p. 6). In defense of their hegemony, the PRI tried vainly to destroy the broadly-based civil society that was growing with each assault on democratic action.

Given the many violent encounters between autonomous hamlets and paramilitary adjuncts in the area, the EZLN chose to boycott elections in the fall of 1995, and their supporters were in disarray. As a result, the PRI was able to win even in the northern electoral districts where

they were least likely candidates (Centro de Derechos Humanos “Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas” 1998:83-87). The manipulation of this electoral district as attested by the Civic Alliance (*Alianza Cívica*)—yet another civil society group overseeing elections—became an arena of violent confrontations. Ch’ol supporters of the opposition party PRD proceeded to take over town halls in the municipalities where the PRI was ensconced and retained power with the help of an armed paramilitary force.

The political process set in motion by heavily armed sectors of civil society culminated in the massacre in Acteal on December 22, 1997 when a paramilitary gang called the Red Masks (*Máscaras Rojas*) shot down 45 women, children, and men. The background to the massacre lay in the growing division among indigenous people as the PRI-favored sectors that supported them in the distribution of Solidarity funds and political power. Gender, class divisions, and religious differences rose as Chenalhó lost more of its lands than most of the highland communities and was reduced to one-third of its colonial holdings by the end of the nineteenth century. Ladino control of the land and of political power in the town was reinforced rather than diminished by the revolution of 1910.

The targeting of women and their children was related to a long history of women’s protest against male dominance and the drive for relations of equality, as Garza and Hernández show in their ethnographic account of the Acteal massacre (Garza Caligaris and Hernández Castillo 2001). Land distribution and political mobilization was restricted to men in the 1970s and 1980s when the first challenge to the PRI monopoly came about. Opposition to the PRI in 1988 was a contest between the parties. The first was organized by the Socialist Workers Party (*Partido Socialista de Trabajadores*, PST) and then by the Cardenista Front of National Reconstruction (*Frente Cardenista de Reconstrucción Nacional*). After the uprising, the civil society campaign for Amado Avendaño won the support of the PST dissidents in Chenalhó, and the PRD was able to elect a mayor in 1995. Since Avendaño was not recognized as governor by the PRI, the opposition group declared Chenalhó an autonomous municipality along with a dozen other communities.

The battlefield was set. In the next two years, violence in the area of the northern zone adjacent to Chenalhó escalated. *Paz y Justicia* and the Chinchulines carried out dozens of murders and assaults. The *Máscaras Rojas*, a private paramilitary group specific to Chenalhó, began to attack the opponents of the PRI. Desperate pleas made to authorities by the Bees (*Las Abejas*, a predominantly catechist group that responded to the Bishop’s Liberation Theology approach) asked the police for protection against the hostile acts, but nothing was done. The Bees fled to the outskirts of the town to escape the harassment of the paramilitary, settling in the ejido Acteal. Instead of responding to their alarm, the army began

training local PRI supporters, including the mayor, Manuel Arias. On the day of the massacre the assembled congregation of the Bees were praying when the *Máscaras Rojas* attacked.

The horror of the encounter surpassed previous conflicts. This event was attested by eyewitnesses (Centro de Derechos Humanos "Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas" 1998; Garza Caligaris and Hernández Castillo 2001). Thirty-six of the victims were women and children; the attackers ripped open the bellies of four pregnant women and chopped up the embryos with their machetes. Some of the armed band played a game of tossing the embryos from one machete wielding paramilitary to the other yelling "*¡Mata la semilla!*" ("Kill the seed!"). Witnesses indicate that the troops were not only armed by the PRI president of the town, but were trained by them under a Chenalhó soldier on leave from the federal army and a retired general. Bishop Samuel Ruiz received word that he relayed in an interview with *Proceso* (December 28, 1997) that the *Máscaras Rojas* appeared to be on drugs. Part of their weeks of training included viewing pornographic videos that were then acted out by live models. The mayor of Chenalhó was charged with distributing arms to the band that carried out the massacre. Jailed along with him is the retired general and soldier on temporary leave (*La Jornada*, April 3, 1998, p. 3).

The escalating conflict in indigenous areas with members of the same community turning against each other culminated decades of contradictory policies and gross neglect of cumulative legal problems related to land distribution and credit distribution (*La Jornada*, April 3, 1998, p. 3, April 5, 1998, p. 5). The militarization of PRI support groups by the government escalated the violence and disintegration of civil society. Yet in the contradictory process in which the PRI government tried to restore their waning hegemony, they pursued a program for domesticating the military, making it an integral part of the civil society. While the paramilitary forces, often trained by the army, carried out what many call genocidal acts (Centro de Derechos Humanos "Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas" 1998), the army performed haircuts and dental services, and distributed sweets to children, and tried to pass out gifts of food and medicine to women. Women refused these handouts and became the main resistance to the military presence. The Washington Office on Latin America reported that the survivors of Acteal massacre rejected the government's \$5,000 indemnity.

In the last years of PRI hegemony, the government was deploying all the skill with which they constructed the hegemonic accord that sustained them in power for seventy years to fragment indigenous organizations that have escaped from their control. In its waning days, they were still able to promote fratricide within indigenous communities,

even as the majority of indigenes are escaping the cooptive network that once framed them. The massacre and subsequent repression crystallized the divisions among civil society formations, with the Bees becoming a leading advocate for civil rights against the paramilitaries. The Bees demonstrated on August 3, 2000 before the White House in the United States, protesting the School of the Americas where troops of the Mexican Army were trained (Herrera 2000).

The presence of international NGOs was especially felt during the tense months following the February 9, 1995 invasion by federal troops of Zapatista territory in the Lacandón forest. Groups from the Midwest and west of the United States arrived in San Cristóbal where they were met by Global Exchange and International Services for Peace, which coordinated work with local organizations such as the Coalition of Non-governmental Organizations for Peace (*Coordinación de Organizaciones No-gubernamental para Paz*, CONPAZ). Military patrols and national immigration services harassed visitors throughout the zone, detaining campesinos as though they were foreigners and detaining foreign tourists for hours. Helicopters and military observation planes, equipped with sensitive observation technology provided to narcotraffic units by the United States, were constantly flying low over the villages of the conflict area. I was with the group of Pastors for Peace when it tried to enter the conflict area but was turned back on February 11. The group of ministers, secretaries, and other professionals finally gained access to the conflict area on February 11, and then became an essential conduit for information for the assembled press and television crews that arrived from all over the world. We later learned that the *Caravana Mexicana*, and national groups organized by CONPAZ as well as the Red Cross and internal press representatives, were also refused entry into the conflict zone the first days of the February 9 invasion.

The active intervention of civil society protesting the militarization of the conflict in the Mexico City plaza, along with the presence of NGOs in peace camps throughout the conflict zone, may have made the difference between the Mexican army's low intensity warfare and the Guatemalan war of extermination in the 1980s. Religious and secular NGOs worked with Mexican civil society groups that brought the government to the negotiating table in San Miguel, followed by the San Andrés Larainzar (renamed San Andrés Sacam Chen de los Pobres) meetings that succeeded in reaching the San Andrés Agreement of February, 1996. Throughout the meetings, civil society groups organized press conferences in the Center for Human Rights "Fray Bartolomé de las Casas" in San Cristóbal. These were attended by a large contingent of press representatives from Europe which was more responsive than the U.S. press. The peace lines in these dialogues were made up of civil

society sectors of campesinos: ARIC, *Las Abejas*, CIOAC, and other indigenous groups of men and women. They surrounded the Red Cross, who took the inner ring, with international observers and Mexicans in the outermost ring. The presence of international and national peace NGOs was essential for the organization and registering of thousands of witnesses and participants and observers. There were no outbreaks of violence despite the frustration of people who had walked for hours to be part of the historic occasions. However, the menacing presence of thousands of federal troops surrounding the town, with a guard of 300 soldiers stationed around the basketball court, was a deterrent to democratic dialogue.

It was in these settings that indigenous people learned of the widespread support for their movement. The national and international press coverage also reflected a different image of them than that conveyed by provincial society (Nash 1997). The international observers were, in turn, impressed by the commitment of indigenous people and their serious intent. They no longer perceived indigenes as marginalized “tribal” or “peasant” populations. The San Andrés Agreements drafted between the CONAI, COCOPA, and the EZLN were heralded as the innovation of a changed state-indigenous relationship by large sectors of Mexican society. The emergence of *indígenas* in these settings indicated their changed status even though the government later refused to comply with the accords their representatives signed.

The Convergence of Human Rights NGOs and Civil Society

Indigenous people are increasingly appealing to human rights accords, thereby gaining support from international agencies (Kearney and Varese 1995). Third World people, and particularly the “Fourth World” enclaves of indigenous people living within them, are just now seeking the rights of man proclaimed in the French and American Revolutions. Revolutionary groups in their midst add to those the collective rights to social and cultural programs that were central to the Russian revolution in 1917. Because these populations often live in the last remaining rainforests or in sites rich in unexploited natural resources, their rights to retain their habitations are threatened by the latest lumber and oil predators. They are more likely to cast their demands in terms of global rights to peace, development, a healthy balanced ecology, and the right to share the common heritage of mankind.⁵

The Vienna declarations on Human Rights in 1993 challenged the concept of rights phrased in terms of individuals with their promotion of communal values. This new declaration neglects the civil and political rights phrased by western powers in terms of freedom of speech,

assembly, and religion which are posed as antithetical to communalistic aspirations. But as Kovic (1995, 2005) indicates in her study of a Catholic base community made up of indigenous people expelled from their community in violation of their rights to freedom of religion, the very communities which were forced into exile on the basis of their violation of traditional values, are now excluding other indigenous people for lack of conformity to the norms of the new community.⁶

Given that the implementation of United Nations covenants depends on the very nation states that are often the major perpetrators of the violations, they were rarely implemented. Yet they provide a basis for outlawing "rogue" states in the developing global arenas, especially in trade agreements, embargoes, weapons inspection, and other spaces where nations agree to disagree. This is precisely the arena in which transnational civil society is expanding as they counter the violence of de-legitimized and dying nation states. The new thrust in human rights conventions, in declaring the rights of people to peace, curbs the very basis of sovereignty. That is, the use of armed force against civilian populations, arbitrary arrests, torture, covert operations, and the denial of their own civil laws that has been taken for granted in the exercise of brute force to maintain elites in power. While recognition of the economic, social, and cultural rights of all members of the human family is posed as the foundation for international peace in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, attempts to add to this list the "Right of Peoples to Peace" as constituting a fundamental obligation of each state has never been formalized. Given the proclivity of nations to turn to militarism in their waning days, the right to peace should move into top priority for transnational civil society, but it may never appear on the United Nations agenda.

The potential of transnational civil society is evident in the promotion of these covenants and in the subsequent attempts by activists to gain recognition and enforcement of them in countries that have ratified several of these key treaties on human rights. The very presence of international groups is seen as a threat for nationalistic interests. The increasing entry of foreign visitors in Chiapas after the uprising resulted in what some call a xenophobic attack as they become the target of the government immigration authorities. Leaders of Global Exchange were expelled, along with six priests from the indigenous communities. In the spring of 1998, all foreigners in Chiapas were treated with suspicion, stopped by military and questioned as to what they are doing.

The transnational human rights networks established by NGOs are instrumental in alerting members and a wider public cued in to them for mobilizations in defense of their appeals. In 1998, the United Nations high commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, suggested that

the Acteal Massacre called for a special report, and the United Nations, responding to the many human rights NGOs in the areas, considered a proposal to have a permanent office in Chiapas (*La Jornada*, April 13, 1998, p. 3). Throughout the month of April, 1998 contingents of foreign human rights observers were detained in jail and finally expelled from the country on the charge that they were violating visa limitations, although the latest group of 114 Italians that were expelled on May 8, 1998 had their documents in order. While the government sees their presence as a violation of national sovereignty, the nation they claim to be defending is a diminishing sector of the PRI. The international NGOs, including Global Exchange, Pastors for Peace, Amnesty, the Center for Human Rights "Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas," and the National Commission of Human Rights—which was a construct of the PRI government—became leading advocates for the imprisoned rebels, coordinating the work of transnational human rights observers that were denied by the PRI government under Zedillo. The government's attempts to limit surveillance by human rights organizations by restricting visas as they promote both military and paramilitary operations in the conflict zone, further undermined the standing of the state in international financial as well as human rights arenas.

The role of international observer reinvents in these novel settings the witnessing that is a hallmark of face-to-face "folk" communities. As Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (1997:12) indicates, "New alliances and goals become possible as domestic civil society joins up with transnational civil society to challenge states and as states in concert employ elements in transnational civil society to limit particular state sovereignty." The very effectiveness of the transnational human rights groups can be measured by the crackdown by the PRI government on their very presence in or near the conflict zone in the undeclared war of the 1990s.

The monopoly of state power by the PRI meant that their decline presaged the decline of the nation. The victory in the presidential elections in July, 2000 ended that monopoly when the victor, Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN), opened new avenues of dialogue with the Zapatistas and other insurgent indigenous groups. His opening up of the country to civil rights observers along with his freeing of political prisoners and the withdrawal of the army from some of its encampments seemed to foretell the greater space for democratic development in Mexico.

Following the victory of the opposition party candidate Vicente Fox the initiative to pass the Accord again fell to the EZLN. The Caravan of Zapatistas and their supporters arrived in Mexico City in December, 2000 and commanders Ester, David, Tacho, and subcommander Marcos called upon civil society supporters to rally for the passage of the bill. But by the time the bill arrived in congress in March, 2001, it was so watered

down that the Zapatistas refused to ratify it. The persistence of Vicente Fox's neoliberal development Plan Pueblo Panamá by his successor, Felipe Calderón, leaves little hope for resumption of negotiation. The army has increased military forces in Ocosingo and San Cristóbal as it pursues development policies that rely on global tourism and investments in assembly operations that reject the collective enterprises sponsored by indigenous people to retain their autonomy.

Conclusion

Social contract theorists from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century emphasized rational solutions brought about through the evolution of legal codes to which religious institutions were anathema. The assumptions of Locke and his contemporaries that civil society represented the unconditional will of the people took for granted the moral commitments inhering in primordial groups, disregarding the conflicts that arise in pluricultural societies that might not share the same values. The enlightenment they extolled was the preserve of privileged white males. The capacity women have demonstrated in Chiapas and other revolutionary contexts to relate their oppression to its root cause in the domestic setting in which they have been socialized to accept a subordinate position. Is a remarkable tribute to the human yearning for autonomy? They demonstrate the fundamental conditions mobilizing women's revolutionary mobilizations throughout Americas and the world.

Strategies of counterinsurgency warfare have invaded the domestic setting introducing militarization into civil society in ways that were anathema to warring nations prior to the Vietnam War. There is growing evidence that religious institutions, particularly in countries where women have few other public settings where they can assert their political needs, are inherent constituents of civil society. Churches and pilgrimages often provide the framework within which women can express themselves as dissidents. The concerns of clerics with human rights, particularly in the tradition of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, were the early bases for addressing abuses of indigenous people who lacked access to legal centers. Among the new directions of a globalized Catholicism in the last decades of the twentieth century are those championing the rights of indigenous people (González Casanova and Cadena Roa 1994). In the zones of mounting rebellion, there is an ever-wider publication and dissemination of liberation doctrine dealing with impoverishment and injustice that promoted Liberation Catholicism. The active and vocal roles of the clergy have made many Mexican and foreign-born priests the martyrs of the church.

The modern conventions of human rights echo papal statements, from John the Twenty-Third's *Mater et Magistra* in 1961 to the *Pacem in Terris* address to the whole world. Documentation of human rights abuses is becoming ever more significant in reaching the world media as the Catholic-sponsored human rights centers and Protestant witnessing expand the work of the United Nations. Clearly in Chiapas, church and secular NGOs were beginning to live with social and cultural pluralism as they have championed the cause of indigenous people. This role culminated in the 1960s and subsequent decades until the end of the century in Latin America. The papal leadership in the Vatican in the third millennium currently weakens it.

Political parties have not succeeded in taking up the challenge. The basis for PRI political hegemony was founded in a cooptive strategy with indigenous pueblos that limited inclusion to males who accepted the premises of subordinating their cultural roots. Although its strength is manifested in the persistence for over seven decades of the corporatist tactics, the erosion of the substantive base of the indigenous economy in the 1970s and 1980s with neoliberal policies undercut the support of indigenous people and the marginalized poor. The very organizations that the PRI promoted—the National Congress of Indians (CNI), the National Council of Indigenous People (*Consejo Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas*, CNPI)—all created ties among Indians at regional and national levels through which they preceded to develop independent programs of action. These, along with grassroots organizations that grew out of regional agrarian struggles—the OCEZ, CIOAC, ARIC—were the basis for parallel organizations that challenged the PRI hegemony as alliances of indigenous with non-indigenous provided the seedbed for a national integrated civil society. The women's movement further broadened the front that ultimately challenged the hegemonic power of a racist and sexist state. Women in these mobilizations became the most forceful advocates for the autonomy they had been denied. Militarization of civil society is a calculated part of counterinsurgency strategy aimed at fragmenting popular resistance and protest. The military incursion made by Salinas following the Zapatista uprising in 1994 was intensified and expanded by Zedillo following the February 9, 1995 invasion of the Lacandón rain forest with paramilitary operations in the Northern Frontier and highland communities. The attempt by the PRI government to blame the violence on dissident religious and campesino groups failed because of the enormous attention the conflict had gained in Mexico and internationally. Although the monopoly of power by the PRI was shaken in the year 2000 by the victory of the National Action Party (PAN), the policies that had undercut its base support persisted in the presidencies of both Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón. The permanent presence of

the military in indigenous regions of Chiapas and the arbitrary use of violence against the indigenous population is calculated to cultivate despair that can destroy the basis for resistance. Civil society is now focused on overcoming impunity for violators against human rights of the communities in resistance.

Civil society has engaged in more than a decade of effort to implement the objectives of the San Andrés Accord of February, 1996 guaranteeing the cultural autonomy of regions with a predominantly indigenous population. In the spring of 1998, Zedillo introduced a watered-down version of the Accord that was unacceptable to the Zapatistas and opposition parties, particularly the *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* and the Workers Party (*Partido de Trabajo*, PT) (*La Jornada*, April 6, 1998, p. 7). The PRD went farther in rejecting what they call Zedillo's attempts to undermine the CONAI and the Agreements of San Andrés.

Indigenous people who have maintained a collective identity even within repressive states are becoming leaders in the spaces opened up by national and transnational civil society. The society of semiautonomous multicultural entities that they are seeking to construct within a national federation of ethnic groups is based on their resistance to domination in 500 years of colonization and independence. It represents a kind of pluricultural and multi-centered society that is more adapted to the emerging global ecumene than nation states.

Giddens (1990:20 et seq.) emphasized the disembedding of social relations from local contexts of interaction and the restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space as the quintessential feature of modernity. The corollary of this is the challenge to a system of morality that relies on community as the unique framework of actors related to specific sanctioning powers. The morality once enshrined in institutions of the church and state that were assumed to be homogeneous requires a broader field in today's multicultural environment. Transnational NGOs that ascribe to human rights are restructuring a new more flexible response that builds on the premises of heterogeneous religious and secular moral orders in their alliances with local civil society. As yet NGOs lack the military sanctioning power of the nations they confront. Recourse to any such option would defeat the moral stance of organizations committed to peaceful negotiation under civil sanctions. However, a multitude of civil organizations, many working specifically with women, are moving toward trade sanctions and banking credit as a means of achieving commitment to human rights covenants. This is the challenge for the coming millennium.

Notes

- ¹ Some of the data included in this paper appeared in Nash (2003).
- ² I had seen teams of oil explorers in outlying hamlets of Chamula in the early 90s, a phenomenon that an former PEMEX engineer explained as an attempt to verify the extent of oil reserves in the lowlands by assessing the appearance in higher altitudes. The first public acknowledgement of the extent of these oil reserves was, to my knowledge, stated in an article in *El Financiero* (February 26, 1995, p. 57).
- ³ CIOAC is a national organization that originated in the Independent Campesino Center that had broken away from the government controlled CNC in 1963 and in turn split into two wings, one "official" PRI and the other communist, which was named CIOAC in 1975 (Mattiace 1997). The expulsion of the latter wing from the Maoist *Partido Político Popular* probably freed these indigenous rural workers and farmers to pursue the uniquely indigenous practices and goals that characterizes CIOAC's actions. The national organization counts about 300 thousand heads of families as members, predominantly in the poorer states of the southeastern part of the country. They were among the first to engage in the takeover of land claims that had not been adjudicated by the government in the year following the uprising. Disdaining the PRI tactics of trucking in campesinos for their demonstrations (called *acarrillados*), the CIOAC members walk hundreds of kilometers to bring their claims to national and regional leaders.
- ⁴ María Santana Echeagary (1996) has documented the role of women in Flor del Río in her field work for her master's thesis during and after the uprising.
- ⁵ These global rights announced by Karel Vasak at the July, 1979 Tenth Study Session of the International Institute of Human Rights have yet to be adopted by the United Nations.
- ⁶ María del Carmen Legoretta Díaz (1988) discusses the role of religion in alternative political movements.

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